THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Humanities: A Foundation Course Units 9 and 10

INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
'Charge' was the captain's cry,
Their's not to reason why,
Their's not to make reply,
Their's but to do or die,
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

The farms of home lie lost in even,
I see far off the steeple stand;
West and away from here to heaven
Still is the land.

There if I go no girl will greet me,
No comrade hollo from the hill,
No dog run down the yard to meet

I wander thro' eac
Near where the ch
And mark in every
Marks of weakness

In every cry of eve
In every Infant's c
In every voice, i
The mind-forg'

How the Chi
Every black'nin
And the hap
Runs in blood

But most thro
How the youth
Blasts the new
And blight

other glove off
swells,
us fields of Eden
Abbey bells.
land's statesmen lie,

cry.
h bomb the Germans
en for Thy sake,
too easy
Thy Mistake.
rd, whate'er shall be,
bomb me.
the tried intent

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots.
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps
And then the lighting of the lamps.

A100 9 and 10

The Open University

Humanities: A Foundation Course **Unit 9**

INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE (PART I)

Prepared by Graham Martin for the Arts Foundation Course Team

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Open University Press Walton Hall Bletchley Bucks

First published 1971

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Designed by The Media Development Group of The Open University

Printed in Great Britain by
OXLEY PRESS LTD.
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

SBN 335 00507 1

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PRELIMINARIES

1.0 LITERATURE IN THE ARTS FOUNDATION COURSE

There are two main works of literature for study in the Foundation Course: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Units 23–4) and D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* (Units 35–6). You will also study some poems and a short story in *Form and Meaning* (Units 15–16). The purpose of this *Introduction to Literature* (Units 9–10) is to concentrate on issues relating to the study of any work of literature in this, or a later course. Part I (Unit 9) will deal mainly with poetry, and has been written by Graham Martin. Part II (Unit 10) will deal with two prose stories, the set texts: the book of *Ruth* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and has been written by Arnold Kettle.

2.0 WHAT IS LITERATURE?

2.1 We do not propose to begin with an extensive definition. In practice, what is called 'literature' in these units is imaginative literature – poems, plays, stories, novels. But of course, the term has a wider range than that. A history of literature will include the work of essayists, discursive prose writers, philosophers, and historians. Or there is 'Literature' with a capital L, as in 'Twentieth-Century Literature', meaning 'works of twentieth-century literature – imaginative and otherwise – *worth talking about*'. 'Literature' in this sense brings up the problem of critical judgement – why some works are said to be worth more discussion than others and how this is decided. Sorting out these different meanings and categories is not only complex, it involves distinctions which only make good sense on the basis of a good deal of reading experience.

2.2 But there is one general point to emphasise. Literature is good writing, and emerges not from the desire to practise an art-form, but from the need to say something adequately. Literature comes about when language is used creatively: it is creative because it conveys to the reader's mind something that was not there before, and because the search for expression is itself creative, leading the writer as well as the reader to a new awareness of what he was looking for. Of course, this search for expression is not confined to writers. It happens all the time in ordinary speech. But our ordinary use of language is seldom *creative*. It does not attempt to convey a *new* awareness, but only a familiar one. So, creative writing needs closer attention than ordinary writing – letters, newspapers, memoranda, etc. – if the reader wants fully to absorb what it has to give. The main business of any serious study of literature amounts to learning this closer form of attention.

3.0 BROADCAST MATERIAL FOR 'INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE'

3.1 WEEK 9

Television: 'The Language of Poetry'
Graham Martin

Radio: 'Psycho-analysis and Literature'
Hugh Sykes Davies

WEEK 10

Television: 'Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*: A Discussion'
Arnold Kettle, Dipak Nandy, Graham Martin

Radio: 'Franz Kafka: A Discussion'
Eduard Goldstücker, Arnold Kettle

See the Broadcasting Supplement for full details.

3.2 RECORDED MATERIAL

Auxiliary material will be found on the Literature record for the Foundation Course.

4.0 ASSIGNMENT FOR 'INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE'

There is a tutor-marked assignment for Units 9–10.

Do not attempt it till you have completed the correspondence material for *both* Units.

5.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF 'INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE, PART I'

5.1 (a) to read poems, and extracts from poems, illustrating essential characteristics of English poetry;
(b) to examine the contribution made by different aspects of poetic language to the meaning of a poem;
(c) to gain experience of an approach to poetry which will be valuable in subsequent reading;
(d) to examine extracts from prose works illustrating similarities between the language of poetry and some kinds of prose.

5.2 The particular aspects of poetic language which you will examine are:

Rhythm	Metaphor and Simile
Rhyme	Tone
Syntax	

One section of the Unit will be devoted to each aspect. In the section on Tone, you will study two poems already discussed in *The Artist and Society* (Unit 4): Wyatt's *Forget Not Yet*, and Blake's *London*. You will be able to relate the formal discussion here to the previous discussion about their social significance.

5.3 The reason for concentrating on the language of poetry is to underline the fact that words are the medium of literature as paint is the

medium of pictorial art, and sound the medium of music. To grasp fully the meaning of a work of literature involves close attention to its verbal structure. This is true of novels and plays as well as of poems. But poems offer better material for illustration.

5·4 If you approach a poem in terms of one aspect of its language – Rhythm, Rhyme, etc. – it means limiting your attention to part of it. Yet this limitation must be temporary, since what matters is not aspects of poems, but whole poems. The only reason for selecting one aspect is to show that it contributes *something* to the whole effect, and that unless you learn to recognise it, part of the whole effect is lost. *There is no point in talking about Rhyme, Rhythm, Metaphor and so forth, unless it leads to a fuller appreciation of the whole poem.*

5·5 Remember that an 'Introduction to Literature' should be judged for its success in helping you to read literature on your own. What matters most about the material you are about to read is not my commentary, but the quality of attention you give to the exercises. In answering these you will probably find that a notebook for fragmentary jottings will be useful, before formulating your final thoughts. *This formulation of your own response to the material is the central activity expected of you.* So, don't just sit back and read. When you are asked to stop and think, *stop and think.* Otherwise the discussion will not achieve its important aim, which is to help you *introduce yourself* to any work of literature that interests you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We wish to thank our colleagues John Ferguson, Cicely Havely, Graham Holderness, Derek Rowntree and Aaron Scharf for valuable criticism of the early drafts of this correspondence material.

A. K. and G. M.

RHYTHM

1.0 The word 'rhythm' comes from a Greek original meaning 'measured motion'. Its presence in spoken language originates in the fact that we stress some syllables and words more strongly than others, so that almost any use of language involves a 'flow' of varying emphases. But rhythm in poems (and even in some kinds of prose) is more striking than in ordinary speech because it is more regular, more patterned. It can be defined as:

repetition of stress in regular patterns.

So, in thinking about poetic rhythm, it is useful to keep in mind both the fact that it has its roots in ordinary speech, and the fact that it is more highly organised, and more purposeful. The mistake is to think of it as something which poets apply to language 'from the outside', that they have thoughts which they then 'versify', i.e. force into a rhythmical mould.

1.1 There is one valuable kind of evidence for this: the intimate connection between rhythm and the composition of poems. W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), for example, seems to have had a pre-verbal stage of composition. He would walk about muttering a rhythmic 'phrase' made up of hummings and burrings which gradually evolved words and sentences and so, in the end, the 'idea' of the new poem. And William Wordsworth (1770–1850) had a habit of oral composition reported by a Grasmere farmer as mightily disturbing:

> thear was anudder thing as kep' fwoaks off, he had a terr'ble girt deep voice, and ye med see his faace agaan for lang eneuf. I've knoan fwoaks, village lads and lasses, coming ower by t' auld road aboon what runs fra Gersmer to Rydal, flayt a'most to death there by t' Wishing Gate to hear t' girt voice a groanin' and mutterin' and thunderin' of a still evening. And he had a way of standin' quite still by t' rock there in t' path under Rydal, and fwoaks could hear sounds like a wild beast coming fra t' rocks, and childer were scared fit to be dead a'most.

The gardening boy at Wordsworth's home, Rydal Mount, told a similar tale:

> he would set his head a bit forrad, and put his hands behint his back. And then he would start a bumming, and it was bum, bum, bum, stop; then bum, bum, bum reet down till t'other end, and then he'd set down and git a bit o' paper out and write a bit; and then he git up, and bum, bum, bum and goa on bumming for long enough right down and back agean. I suppose, ya kna, the bumming helped him out a bit. However, his lips was always goan' whoale time he was upon the gres walk.

Wordsworth wrote a number of discursive meditative poems with long paragraphs in unrhymed verse. Perhaps, as the gardener's boy said, 'the bumming helped him out a bit'.

1.2 T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) is usefully explicit on this point:

> For other poets . . . the poem may begin to shape itself in fragments of musical rhythm, and its structure will first appear in terms of something analogous to musical form.

Fig. 1 William Wordsworth

And when he describes more generally the effect of rhythmic patterns upon the reader, he suggests that sensitivity to rhythm is one of the most important responses we can develop.

> What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meaning, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality.

1.3 What does Eliot mean by the term 'auditory imagination'? It is based on 'visual imagination', and just as the mind can 'see' a scene which a poet describes, so it can 'hear' the sound of the lines which he uses to describe it. The cultivation of this response to poetic rhythm is one of the aims of this section, and an essential aid is reading aloud to yourself the poems for discussion (or even into a tape-recorder so that you can play back the effect). This is not for purposes of elocution, or party recitations. It is to develop your ability to *hear* the lines as well as to read them, to respond to the words *as a pattern of articulate sounds*. Without this response, discussion of the meaning of rhythmic effects will inevitably strike you as empty talk. So when you come to an example, read it by ear, as well as by eye, if necessary by first reading it aloud.

2.0 If rhythm is so closely connected with the actual composition of poems, it must also be connected with what they mean. Do T. S. Eliot's comments confirm this? Re-read them, and underline any relevant sentences.

2.1 There is a sentence in the second comment that you should have underlined:

> It works through meaning certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense.

Eliot makes the point carefully because in particular cases, it is often very difficult to say *how* a rhythmic pattern contributes to the whole. There are several reasons for this. Rhythmic effects are only one part of a total meaning. They interact with other aspects of poetic language. They are often subtle and elusive. And they are also hard to *describe*. The examples discussed here have been chosen with these problems in mind. I want to establish that there *is* a connection between rhythm and meaning, and this involves using material in which the connections *can* be discussed without too much difficulty.

2.2 A traditional way of discussing rhythm is to use technical scansion, that is to say, to describe a given rhythm as belonging to one or other technical category. We must pay some attention to scansion but it has only limited usefulness. It fails to meet the major issue, which is – the *meaningfulness* in particular passages of poetry of particular rhythmic patterns. A better, though still not a satisfactory way of describing rhythmic effects is to consider their effect on our feelings. In ordinary speech, we communicate different feelings partly by the pace of utterance – quickly when we are excited, slowly when we are tired, and so forth. Similarly, we can say something about the meaning of poetic rhythms by using a language of the feelings. But it remains an approximate kind of description. So when I suggest that such-and-such a rhythm communicates such-and-such a feeling, you must not expect precision.

3.0 But first, there is one quite general contribution which rhythm makes to poems. It catches and holds the reader's or listener's attention. Here are two short speeches:

> Friends, can I have your attention for a moment? I'd like you to listen to an interesting and amusing song. So, come a bit closer, while I tell you a story about a strange dream which came to Queen Victoria.

> Good people give attention, and listen for a while,
> To an interesting ditty, which cannot fail to make you smile,
> So all draw near, and lend an ear, while I relate a theme,
> Concerning of Victoria, a strange and funny dream.

If you spoke them at a party, which would be most likely to hold people's attention and why?

Surely the second, because it has a more pronounced rhythm than the first (remember the definition of poetic rhythm in 1.0). Perhaps this rhythm is rough-and-ready, especially the second line, but it's clear enough. Try reading it aloud, if you're in any doubt.

3.1 Poems for public recitation often have rhythms like this. The quoted verse is from a Victorian street ballad which the ballad-seller would recite, as well as sell in printed form. Here are the opening verses:

> THE QUEEN'S DREAM
>
> Good people give attention, and listen for a while,
> To an interesting ditty, which cannot fail to make you smile,
> So all draw near, and lend an ear, while I relate a theme,
> Concerning of Victoria, a strange and funny dream.

CHORUS

So these are dreams and visions
Of old England's blooming Queen.

At the Isle of Wight, the other night, as Vic lay in her bed,
Strange visions did to her appear, and dreams came in her head;
She drew Prince Albert by the nose, and gave a dreadful scream,
Oh, dear, she said, I'm filled with dread, I'd such a dreadful dream.

Says Albert, Vic, what are you at? you've made my nose quite sore,
I'm in a mind, for half a pin, to kick you on the floor,
Such dreams for me will never do, you pepper'd me with blows.
I never knew a wife to dream, and pull her husband's nose.

O, don't be vexed, the Queen replied, you know I love you well,
So listen awhile dear Albert, and my dreams to you I'll tell:
Last night, she said, I had a dream, as soon as I lay down,
I thought Napoleon had come o'er, to steal away my crown.

The vision of Napoleon appeared at my bedside,
He said that by my subjects he had greatly been belied,
But now, said he, I'll be revenged, I'll quickly make you rue,
And I'll take away the laurels that were won at Waterloo.

(You will find the rest in *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (1969) pp. 419–21.)

3.2 (a) The process of deciding about the rhythm of a line of verse is called *scanning*, or working out the *scansion* of the line. This is done by marking those words or syllables which are strongly stressed. Most English words of more than one syllable are pronounced with some syllables more heavily stressed than others. This normal stress pattern provides the basis of the more organised stress pattern in rhythmic verse. Thus, in the first line of the ballad, the natural pronunciation of '*peop*le', 'at*tent*ion', and '*list*en', puts the stress on the syllables I have italicised. Further, a line of verse usually stresses the last, or last but one syllable, because, coming at the end of the line, it is followed by a slight pause. So we can add 'while' to the stressed words or syllables, giving this result:

Good PEOPle give atTENTion, and LISTen for a WHILE,

When we have worked out that this line has four strongly stressed syllables, we have *scanned* it.

3.2 (b) Now you may have found that a rather laborious performance. It's not a difficult rhythm to work out, and you probably did it without thinking. But it's useful to see in detail that the basis of poetic rhythm *does* lie in normal speech patterns. When you have difficulty scanning a line of verse, it is always helpful to make sure of the natural pronunciation first. The ballad clearly is much *more regularly* rhythmic than ordinary speech, but you can see how it relies on it by trying to pronounce 'people' or 'attention' or 'listen' with the stress on the wrong syllables.

The rhythmic pattern, then, has four stresses in the line. Here is how the rest of the verse should be scanned:

To an INteresting DITty, which cannot FAIL to make you SMILE,
So ALL draw near, and LEND an ear, while *I* relate a THEME,
ConCERNing of VicTORia, a STRANGE and funny DREAM.

If you count up the syllables you will find that the lines vary (13, 16, 14, 14), but as you see, the stress pattern is consistent. Certain lines may, admittedly, cause some hesitation. For example, you might want to scan the third as:

So all draw NEAR, and lend an EAR, while . . . etc.

But the line could be spoken naturally and effectively either way, and as long as the main pattern holds, either scansion is possible. If you want some practice in scanning, go through the rest of the ballad marking the stressed syllables or words with a cross. (You will find my version at the end of this section.) It's important to remember that scansion is an aid to grasping the rhythmic pattern, and not an end in itself.

3.3 How is it that this kind of rhythm is effective in holding our attention? It sets up in the mind *a pattern of expectation*. Having responded to the rhythm once, the mind is attuned to it, and wants to hear it repeated. Think of the way we respond to a regular drum-beat. Or to hearing somebody in the house next door picking out on the piano a tune we like. As soon as we recognise it, we start to complete it for ourselves, and if the pianist is still fumbling for the right notes, we feel irritated: the expectation aroused by his first notes has not been satisfied. But a completed rhythm first creates an expectation, and then satisfies it. That is how the rhythm of the ballad holds the attention, and this effect is present to greater or less extent in all poems. *Its connection with meaning is that it concentrates attention on what the poem has to communicate.*

4.0 Here is another example of markedly public rhythm, again from a poem that can be effectively recited.

THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

Half a league, half a league,
  Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
  Rode the six hundred.
'Charge' was the captain's cry;
Their's not to reason why,
Their's not to make reply,
Their's but to do or die,
Into the valley of Death
  Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
  Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
  Rode the six hundred.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1898)

The rhythm is more strongly marked than that of *The Queen's Dream*. Once established, it is held to more or less consistently; a strongly stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

HALF a league, HALF a league
  HALF a league, ONward. . . .

THEIR'S not to REASon why,
THEIR'S not to MAKE reply,
THEIR'S but to DO or die,

The pattern is so strong that it over-rides the usual stress falling on the last syllable of the line: 'why' and '-ply' and 'die' are more

strongly stressed than their corresponding words in the first half of the line ('to' in each case), but compared to the main stresses, the emphases are not strongly felt.

4.1 Now while this pattern is effective in catching attention, it is also doing something more complicated than the rhythm of *The Queen's Dream*. Bearing in mind that what we are looking for is broad connections between rhythmic effect and *meaning*, what else do you notice about the rhythm of Tennyson's poem?

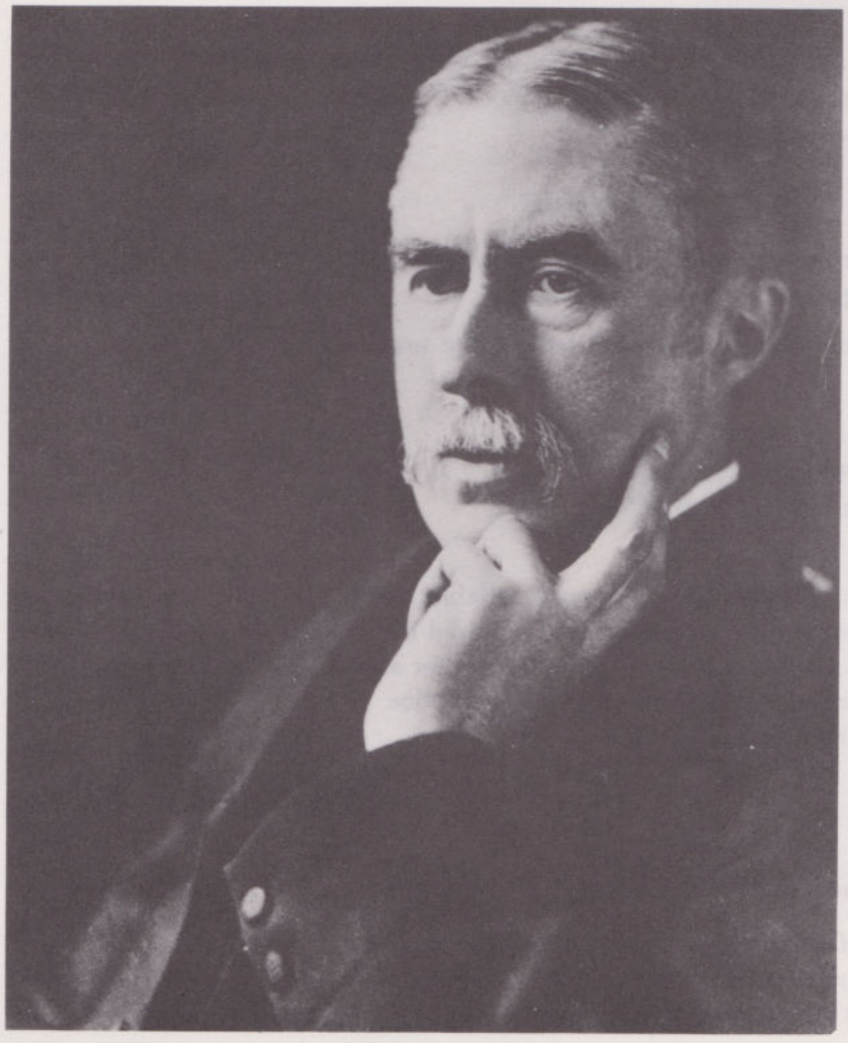


Fig. 2 A. E. Housman

DISCUSSION

I think there are at least two other effects.

(a) The obvious one of conveying the effect of galloping horses.
(b) The subtler one of conveying something of the determined will and resolution expressed in a line like 'Theirs but to do or die'. Note that just as the cannon didn't alter the brigade's determination to charge, so the rhythm of the second verse is identical with the first. This is a case of *dramatic* rhythm – an enactment of aspects of the situation which the verse as a whole describes, the physical rhythm of the horses, the mental state of the riders.

So the rhythm as a whole combines the general function of holding attention, with the more specialised function of *dramatising* or *enacting* parts of the meaning.

5.0 Both *The Queen's Dream* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* show rhythms with a high degree of regularity. But effects from such rhythms are usually simple, and can be monotonous. Most poetry combines regularity with variation of rhythm. Read this poem, for example.

The farms of home lie lost in even,
I see far off the steeple stand;
West and away from here to heaven
Still is the land.

There if I go no girl will greet me,
No comrade hollo from the hill,
No dog run down the yard to meet me:
The land is still.

The land is still by farm and steeple,
And still for me the land may stay:
There I was friends with perished people,
And there lie they.

A. E. Housman (1859–1936)

5.1 Now scan the first verse by marking the appropriate words/syllables. Also mark the unstressed or lightly stressed words/syllables.

5.2 Here is the verse with stressed syllables in capital letters, the unstressed in lower case.

The FARMS / of HOME / lie LOST / in EV/en,
I SEE / far OFF / the STEEP/le STAND;
WEST and / aWAY / from HERE / to HEAV/en
STILL is / the LAND.

This particular combination of stressed and unstressed syllables is called an *iambic* rhythm, and each unit of one unstressed followed by one stressed syllable, is called an *iambic foot*. (The general term for a rhythmic unit in any line of verse is a *foot*.) Now what do you notice about the openings of the last two lines of the first verse?

5.3 Both vary the iambic pattern:

WEST and, STILL is.

Here the pattern of unstress/stress has been reversed.

This is one of the main kinds of rhythmic variation: *reversing the main pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables*. What other lines in the poem show a variant in the first foot? Underline the relevant words.

5.4 Line 5 and line 11.

5.5 Line 6 shows another form of variation. The basic pattern *should* stress: com-, holl-, from, hill. But to read it as:

No COMrade HOLLo FROM the HILL

would be unnatural and stilted. Remember the principle of following the rhythm of normal pronunciation. This gives a different pattern:

NO COMrade HOLlo from the HILL

The pattern leads us to expect a stress on 'from' but the word itself resists this: normal pronunciation requires only a light stress, if any. Similarly, we do not expect a stress on the first syllable, but it is difficult to avoid with the long vowel of 'No'.

In reading variant lines like this, the presence of the regular rhythm is still felt. There is a slight tension between the pattern the poem leads us to expect, and the normal way of pronouncing the line. Thus, the rhythm keeps contact both with normal speech, and with the more organised requirements of poetry.

Now look for another line in the third verse which shows this kind of variation.

5.6 The third line. Write it below according to the regular pattern, using capital letters for the stressed syllables. Then, according to the rhythm of normal speech.

REGULAR

NORMAL

5.7 The regular pattern has stresses on: dog, down, yard, meet.

The speech pattern involves some stress on: No, run.

5.8 So, the poem seems at first much more regular than it is. These slight but significant variations in the stress pattern created by playing off the expected pattern against the actual rhythm of speech prevent monotony.

5.9 Finally, a more prominent example of variant rhythm, which connects quite explicitly with meaning. Each verse shows it. Do you see what it is?

In each verse, the first three lines have four main stresses, and the fourth line has two. What effect does this have in relation to the meaning of the poem?

5.10 **DISCUSSION**

Its immediate effect is to create a pause at the end of each verse. And this is appropriate for the general sense of the poem. Housman is thinking of a place where he used to be at home, where he knew people who are now all dead. He may even be thinking of the graveyard where they are buried: 'And there lie they'. At any rate, a meditative pause is appropriate, and even eloquent. In the first two verses when the reader is still not entirely sure what the situation is (only with 'perished people' does it become clear) the effect seems to be to anticipate the final pause. Or, we could even say that each fourth line, by breaking the rhythm of the previous lines, suggests the finality of death.

This rhythmic pattern then actively contributes to the poem's mood and ideas: loss of the past, the death of family and friends.

6.0 Now read the following poem carefully, then all the questions listed below; then answer them in order.

IN RESPECTFUL MEMORY OF MR. YARKER

And have we lost another friend?
How sad the news to tell!
Alas! Poor Mr. Yarker's gone –
Hark to the tolling bell!

Alas! how many now drop off –
What numbers are unwell;
Another mortal borne away –
Hark to the tolling bell!

6.1 (a) What feeling is the poem trying to convey?

(b) Do you think it successfully conveys this feeling?

(c) Describe the rhythmic effect with a single word (e.g. vigorous, sorrowful, etc.).

(d) Do you see any connection between the rhythm and the over-all effect? What is it?

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

DISCUSSION

6.2 (a) A feeling of sadness about Mr. Yarker's death, and a more general feeling about the fact that death threatens everybody.

(b) I do not think it is successful in conveying either feeling. If you agree, then go on to (c). If not, then read it again with the following questions in mind. Is the tone of the first two lines of each verse appropriate to their meaning? (Try speaking the lines at what seems their natural pace – i.e. don't impose a funereal pace *on* them.) Does the chatty language of the first line make a good introduction to the poem? Does it fit well with words like 'alas', 'hark' and 'mortal'? Does the third line of the second verse evoke a solemn scene for you? If it does, is that the way in which it seems appropriate to refer to it?

Don't force your response. The point of these questions is to make you *read more fully* what the poet has actually written, and to ask whether his words create the effect he clearly wants. As long as you have fairly considered them you can go forward to (c). You know what I think, and should be sure enough of your own view to make use of the discussion.

(c) I would call the rhythm brisk, chirpy, almost cheerful.

(d) It is one of my main reasons for considering the poem a failure. Its author claims that his news is 'sad', that he is mourning a dead friend, that many men are dying ('Alas!'). But the rhythm conveys a different feeling altogether. This conflict of intention and achieved effect makes his sorrow appear superficial. It may, of course, be that the author had sincere deep feelings about Mr. Yarker's death, but what concerns us is his poem, and this hasn't sufficiently mastered a basic device of communication through language to convey genuine sadness.

There are other reasons for considering the poem a failure. The rhetorical questions give it a theatrical air. Mr. Yarker himself gets perfunctory attention. The second verse is both commonplace in thought, as well as a distraction from the poem's proper subject: Mr. Yarker. But the rhythm is certainly a prominent failure.

6.3 As with the Housman poem, the rhythm makes its contribution to the poem's meaning mainly in terms of the mood it conveys. But unlike the Housman, this mood goes *against* the total effect the poet wants. So the main point to remember about this example is that where, in a successful poem, the rhythm reinforces the general meaning by co-operating with other aspects of the poem, in an unsuccessful poem a major cause can be the failure of the rhythm to contribute appropriately to the whole effect.

7.0 Finally, here is a pair of poems with contrasting rhythmic effects, both by William Cowper (1731–1800).

THE POPLAR FIELD

The poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
The winds play no longer, and sing in the leaves,
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

Twelve years have elaps'd since I first took a view
Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew,

Fig. 3 William Cowper

And now in the grass behold they are laid,
And the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade.

The blackbird has fled to another retreat
Where the hazels afford him a screen for the heat,
And the scene where his melody charm'd me before
Resounds with his sweet-flowing ditty no more.

My fugitive years are all hasting away,
And I must ere long lie as lowly as they,
With a turf on my breast, and a stone at my head,
Ere another such grove shall arise in its stead.

'Tis a sight to engage me, if anything can,
To muse on the perishing pleasures of man;
Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments, I see,
Have a being less durable even than he.

7.1 Read the poem carefully two or three times, then work your way through these questions.

(a) What main point do the *last two verses* make?

(b) What kind of feeling does Cowper attempt to convey in the last two verses?

(c) Describe the effect of the rhythm of these final verses in one or two adjectives (gay, pensive, etc.).

(d) Does the rhythm contribute to, or detract from, the total effect intended in the last two verses? Give your reasons briefly.

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

7.2 **DISCUSSION**

(a) Soon the poet will die, and the felled poplars make him realise that men's pleasures are even more temporary than their lives.

(b) A feeling of melancholy appropriate to such traditional moralising.

(c) The effect is vigorous, even rollicking.

(d) It detracts from the effect intended under (b), and even introduces inappropriate associations.

> 'Tis a sight to engage me if anything can
> To muse on the perishing pleasures of man.

This couplet is characteristic. I daresay it *can* be read slowly and thoughtfully, but the natural speed is almost jolly, as of some drinking song, and unsuitable for 'musing'. The unsuitability is not as disastrous as in the case of late-lamented Mr. Yarker, but it detracts from the total effect.

7.3 It won't be necessary to quote the whole of the second Cowper poem to make the point that concerns us here.

> PITY FOR POOR AFRICANS
>
> I own I am shock'd at the purchase of slaves
> And fear those who buy them and sell them are knaves;
> What I hear of their hardships, their tortures, and groans,
> Is almost enough to draw pity from stones.
>
> I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,
> For how could we do without sugar and rum?
> Especially sugar, so needful we see?
> What? give up our desserts, our coffee, and tea!
>
> Besides, if we do, the French, Dutch and Danes,
> Will heartily thank us, no doubt, for our pains;
> If we do not buy the poor creatures, they will,
> And tortures and groans will be multiplied still.
>
> If foreigners likewise would give up their trade,
> Much more in behalf of your wish might be said;
> But while they get riches by purchasing blacks,
> Pray tell me why we may not also go snacks[1]?
>
> 1 'To go snacks' means 'to have a share in'.

7.4 Before we discuss the rhythm, let us agree on the meaning. The speaker of the poem is, as it were, a character invented by Cowper in order to make a point about 'pity' for poor Africans. Bearing this fact in mind, read the verses over again, then answer these questions.

(a) The poem's speaker claims to be *shocked* at the purchase of slaves. Do you think that he really *is* shocked?

(b) What opinion of the speaker do these verses suggest Cowper wants us to have?

(c) Do these verses tell us anything about Cowper's attitude to the slave-trade? Give brief details.

(a)

(b)

(c)

7·5 **DISCUSSION**

(a) The speaker is not really shocked. As soon as his 'pity' threatens to involve any sacrifice of his comforts, he decides to keep 'mum'.
(b) A highly critical attitude, even a scornful one.
(c) Yes. Cowper's criticism of the liberal pretensions of the speaker imply a genuine indignation on his part about the slave-trade. Note, also, the impact of the argument that since other European nations will continue the trade, there is no point in the English surrendering their share of the rich cake.

7.6 Now let us look at the poem's rhythm, and compare it with *The Poplar Field*. Mark the stressed words or syllables in these two verses.

A. 1 'Tis a sight to engage me if anything can,
2 To muse on the perishing pleasures of man;
3 Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments I see,
4 Have a being less durable even than he.

B. 1 I own I am shock'd at the purchase of slaves
2 And fear those who buy them and sell them are knaves;
3 What I hear of their hardships, their tortures and groans,
4 Is almost enough to draw pity from stones.

My version would go:

A. (1) sight, -gage, an-, can; (2) muse, per-, pleas-, man;
(3) life, dream, -joy-, see; (4) be-, dur-, ev-, he.

B. (1) own, shock'd, pur-, slaves; (2) fear, buy, sell, knaves;
(3) hear, hard-, tor-, groans; (4) al-, -nough, pit-, stones.

This produces a similar stress pattern for both verses. Notice also how it is reinforced by a similar pattern for the unstressed, or lightly stressed, words and syllables. Each stress is preceded by two unstressed syllables.

A. 1 'Tis a SIGHT / to enGAGE / me if AN-/ything CAN
B. 1 I OWN / I am SHOCK'D / at the PRE-/sence of SLAVES

There is an exception in the first rhythmic unit or foot of B. 1. But this is common in such verse. Underline the other variants in each verse before going further.

7.7 The openings of A. 2, B. 2, and B. 4 are similar to B. 1. But this slight variation doesn't upset the main pattern.

7.8 Now I have already suggested that this rhythm is not appropriate for the final mood of *The Poplar Field*, because of its energetic galloping effect. Bearing in mind Cowper's view of the speaker of the verses from *Pity for Poor Africans*, what do you think of its suitability for what he has to say?

DISCUSSION

I think it *is* suitable, and contributes valuably to the over-all meaning of the verses. Remember the objections I advanced to the rhythm of the Mr. Yarker elegy (6.3): its brisk chirpy effect contradicted the poet's claim to be feeling sorrowful. In other words, the poet's feelings about Mr. Yarker seem superficial. Similarly, the speaker of Cowper's verses expresses superficial pity for the slaves, but the difference is that while Mr. Yarker's poet wants us to accept his feelings at their face-value, Cowper wants us to react *critically* towards his speaker. So, the rhythm here works in Cowper's favour. It suggests the light-heartedness appropriate to somebody who can so quickly throw off his sympathy for the victims of the trade. It appreciably sharpens the mood of scornful rejection of the speaker's point of view. Think again of the concluding lines:

> But while they get riches by purchasing blacks,
> Pray tell me why we may not also go snacks?

'Go snacks', with its colloquial flavour, brings in a note of intimate bargain-clinching – you get your whack and I get mine, and that's all that matters – in fine contrast to the reality behind the bargain: 'tortures and groans will be multiplied still'.

7.9 In sum, if we *scan* these two verses by Cowper we get almost identical results. But if we relate each rhythmic pattern to the way it contributes to its own context, we get contrasting results. In *The Poplar Field* the rhythm goes against the musing mood, whereas in *Pity for Poor Africans* it reinforces the poet's critical view of the speaker's opinions. The *meaning* of the rhythm then makes a positive contribution to the over-all effect. So this is an example of successful rhythmic effect.

8.0 In this section the following main points have been discussed:

(a) Rhythm in poetry has a general function of concentrating the reader's attention on the substance of the poem.
(b) Rhythm can also reinforce meaning by affecting feeling and mood.
(c) Rhythm is mainly a product of stress pattern.
(d) Stress pattern derives from the normal pronunciation of words and the normal kind of emphasis required by an intelligible sentence.

(e) Regular rhythmic pattern usually contains a succession of slight variations created by playing off the natural spoken rhythm against the pattern.

(f) The rhythmic patterns which can be described by *scansion*, i.e. by marking the stress pattern, must be related to the over-all meaning of their contexts before their concrete effects can be known.

8.1 The main thing to be learned from this section, however, is the need to develop a sensitive response to rhythmic effects, and to try to relate them to the meaning as a whole. The *effort* is, perhaps, more important than the conclusion you may (or may not) reach, because it exercises the 'auditory imagination', the ability to enter into the kind of experiences evoked by the rhythm.

8.2 Finally, one corollary from 8.0 (d) and (e). Rhythm is dependent on normal pronunciation of normal sentences. This means it is dependent on word-order, or to use a more technical term, on *syntax*. Syntax is the subject of the third section, and there we shall discuss how it affects rhythm.

9.0 SCANSION OF 'THE QUEEN'S DREAM' (see 3.2)

The stressed syllables in the remaining verses are:

Verse 2: Wight, night, Vic, bed;
vis-, -pear, dreams, head;
drew, nose, gave, scream;
dear, filled, dread-, dream.

Verse 3: Al-, are, made, sore;
mind, pin, kick, floor;
dreams, do, pep-, blows;
knew, dream, pull, nose.

Verse 4: don't, Queen, know, well;
list-, Al-, dreams, tell;
night, had, soon, down;
-pol-, o'er, steal, crown.

Verse 5: vis-, -pol, -pear-, -side;
said, sub-, great-, -lied;
now, -veng-, quick-, rue;
take, laur-, won, -loo.

There are several cases when, in the first half of the line, other syllables could reasonably be chosen. The test that matters is whether the scansion accords with an effective delivery allowing a steady four beats per line.

RHYME

1.0 Before discussing how poets use rhyme, it is worth remembering that in our language it seems to have an intrinsic appeal – certainly to children, and something of this persists in any adult response to rhyme, however sophisticated the context.

> Rhyme seems to appeal to a child as something funny and remarkable in itself, there need be neither wit nor reason to support it.
>
> Mrs. White had a fright
> In the middle of the night,
> She saw a ghost eating toast
> Half-way up the lamp-post.
>
> 'I think what's so clever about this', says a nine-year-old, 'is the way it all rhymes'. . . . And in the school forecourt twenty or thirty children, those who live in the outlying villages, are killing time, while they wait for the school bus 'which is always late', chorusing at the full extent of their voices.
>
> Never let your braces dangle,
> Never let your braces dangle.
> Poor old sport
> He got caught
> And went right through the mangle;
> Went through the mangle he did, by gum.
> Came out like linoleum,
> Now he sings in kingdom-come:
> Never let your braces dangle, chum.
>
> Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children*, Oxford, 1959, pp. 17–18.

Children like rhyme in the way that, a certain age, they like any playing about with language. Nor should this surprise us. Learning language amounts to a child's passport into a fully human world. Think of the complexity of human speech simply at the level of articulation, of the intricate controls of tongue, lips, palate and throat which it requires. Then add to that the complexity of meanings a child has to master to make known quite simple needs and wishes. Exercising one's mastery of some key skill is intrinsically satisfying, and perhaps this deep-laid sense of having successfully learned to use language in the first place lies at the centre of an adult's pleasure in its more playful uses. Rhyme in poetry adapts this intrinsic response to its own purpose.

2.0 What is Rhyme? Dictionaries usually define it strictly:

> Identity of sound between words or verse-lines extending from the end to the last fully accented vowel and not further.
>
> *Concise Oxford Dictionary*

Thus, *greet/deceit* and *shepherd/leopard* are rhymes, but *seat/deceit* and *visible/invisible* are not. Why?

Because the similarity extends *beyond* the last fully-accented vowel. The definition means that the final consonants and the final stressed vowels of the rhyme words should be identical but that *the consonants preceding the vowel should be different.* A word, that is, cannot rhyme with itself.

2.1 But the strict definition leads to difficulties. Look at these lines.

EASTER 1916

I have met them at break of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered a while and said
Polite meaningless words . . .
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn.
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

W. B. Yeats

Here is a list of the end-words. On the definition given at the beginning of this paragraph, which are rhymed and which are not?

	UNRHYMED	*RHYMED*
1 day/grey	☐	☐
2 faces/houses	☐	☐
3 head/said	☐	☐
4 words/words	☐	☐
5 -ly/I	☐	☐
6 worn/born	☐	☐

Put a cross in the appropriate column.

Fig. 4 W. B. Yeats

2.2 DISCUSSION

(a) There are three rhymes: 1, 3, 6.
(b) You may well have marked number 5. But the last syllable of 'utterly' is not identical with 'I', so a strict application of the definition would exclude it.
(c) Number 4 is not a rhyme because the identity of sounds extends beyond the last stressed vowel.
(d) Number 2 is not a rhyme because the last stressed vowels differ: *faces/houses*.

How are we to explain these variants, or exceptions? Are they mistakes? Do we call them 'bad' rhymes – admissions of technical incompetence?

2.3 The explanation is that the strict definition of rhyme as *identity* of sound does not correspond with the actual practice of poets. We should, rather, think of similarity of sound. That is why number 5 (*utterly/I*) is commonly accepted as rhyme. But number 2 (*faces/houses*) involves deliberate contrast of vowel sounds in the stressed syllable with identity of final consonants and vowels. If the words had been *face/house*, it would be an example of *off-rhyme*, or *partial rhyme* deliberately used to introduce disturbance into the pattern of full rhymes. And number 4 is equally deliberate. Look at it again. What do you notice about the whole lines?

Not only are the end-words identical, so are the lines (except for 'or'). By repeating it, Yeats emphasises just how meaningless the polite greetings are.

2.4 Here are further examples of types of rhyme from the poetry of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918).

> We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
> Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army.
>
> *Exposure*

> It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
> Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
> Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned.
>
> *Strange Meeting*

> Happy are these who lose imagination:
> They have enough to carry with ammunition.
>
> *Insensibility*

The first example is *partial rhyme* like the Yeats (*fac-/hous-*) except that the first word has a consonant, the second has not. The second quotation illustrates *half-rhyme* where the consonants before and after the stressed vowel are identical but the vowels differ. The last example (*-gination/-munition*) is more complicated. The final syllables are *identical*; the last stressed syllables are *half-rhymed*; the penultimate stressed syllables show *off-rhyme* or *partial rhyme*.

2.5 So far we have been discussing *end-rhyme*, rhyme between words at the ends of verse-lines. But there is also *internal rhyme*, a rhyme within a single line.

> She saw a ghost eating toast
> Half-way up a lamp-post.

The internal rhyme is .....

ghost/toast. As you see, this is really a case of line arrangement. The internal rhyme disappears if you write the verse as:

> She saw a ghost,
> Eating toast,
> Half-way up a lamp-post.

This is not a subtle example! The effect can be less assertive, and more interesting.

2.6 Internal rhyming is less important than the closely-related *assonance*, the term for vowel-similarities within a line, or between lines. The similarities have to be fairly striking, e.g. by occurring in words which are also important for their meaning. It is sometimes difficult to decide what counts as significant, and not just accidental, similarity. Thus, in the last two words of the sentence you have just read, there is vowel similarity. Underline the appropriate syllables.

They are: *-cid-* and *sim-*, or *-mil-* or *-rit-*.

But *assonance* is more striking. Consider this verse:

> THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE
>
> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky;
> Upon the brimming water among the stones
> Are nine-and-fifty swans.
>
> W. B. Yeats

There is assonance between the first and third lines. Underline the appropriate syllables.

*aut*umn/*wat*er show assonance on the first syllables.

What other examples of assonance are there? Underline the appropriate syllables.

*Mir*rors/*still*/*brimming*/*fifty*; *twilight*/*sky*/*nine*.

2.7 There is a case of *partial rhyme* in the Yeats verse. Underline the words.

stones/*swans*.

This is worth noting because there are also cases of *internal partial rhyme*, which have an effect not unlike assonance. Look at *aut*umn/*beauty*. Which of the Owen rhymes in 2.4 does it resemble?

stormy/*army* has a similar relationship in the first syllables. Similarly, *beauty*/*wood*land have something approaching a partial rhyme on the first syllables if we remember that *t* and *d* are similar consonants.

In sum, the verse shows several kinds of sound effect: the conventional full rhyme (*dry*/*sky*), the partial rhyme (*stones*/*swans*), the cases of assonance and internal partial rhyme. It is a good example of the importance of not confining our attention to full rhyme when we are looking at the sound of verse.

2.8 (a) Finally, one more sound similarity, *alliteration*, which means the similarity of the first consonants of two or more words. Underline the alliterating words in this couplet?

> In pious times, e'r Priestcraft did begin,
> Before *Polygamy* was made a Sin.
>
> John Dryden (1631–1700), *Absalom and Achitophel*, ll. 1–2.

pious, priestcraft, polygamy.

If you want another brief exercise, there is alliteration in the Yeats verse discussed in 2.7.

2.8 (b) In *The Artist and Society* (Unit 4) a poem was discussed in which alliteration was crucial to the effect. Do you remember it?

It was *The Battle of Maldon*. English poetry before Chaucer's time (the fourteenth century) used alliteration as its basic device. It remains important in most poetry. Critics have sometimes called it *front-rhyme* as a way of bringing out its connection with effects deriving from rhyme. There is no time to discuss an example in detail, but the main point to remember is that like other sound similarities, *alliteration connects words together and helps to reinforce meaning*. In the Dryden example, a satirical gibe is being made at *priestcraft*: the alliteration connects the relevant words.

2.9 Briefly to sum up this section so far: you should try to remember the application of the various terms (half-rhyme, partial rhyme, assonance, alliteration), and to recognise their connection with traditional full rhyme, and you should be on the look-out for examples in future material. But *what really matters is that you should acquire the habit of noticing significant sound-similarities, whatever their source.*

3.0 We can now move on to discuss the purpose of rhyme. Why do poets use it? What meaning, if any, does rhyme contribute? We will concentrate on end-rhyme, because that is the most extensive kind.

4.0 Any inspection of end-rhyme shows a close connection between rhyme and rhythm. (Both words have the same Greek original.) Nursery rhymes and word-jingles show this at once.

> Hickory-dickory dock.
> The mouse ran up the clock.
> The clock struck one.
> The mouse ran down.
> Hickory-dickory dock.

Here the rhymes seem mainly an additional way of marking the stress that falls on the last word of each line. We can illustrate this in reverse with a limerick:

> There was an old man of Dunoon
> Who always ate soup with a fork.
> He said, 'As I eat
> Neither fish fowl nor flesh,
> I should finish my dinner too quick.'

4.1 Part of the joke here is that the familiar rhythmic shape suggests the presence of rhymes that aren't there. We can't quite *believe* that it doesn't rhyme.

Or consider the kind of rhyme-plus-rhythm most favoured by eighteenth-century poets like Alexander Pope (1688–1744).

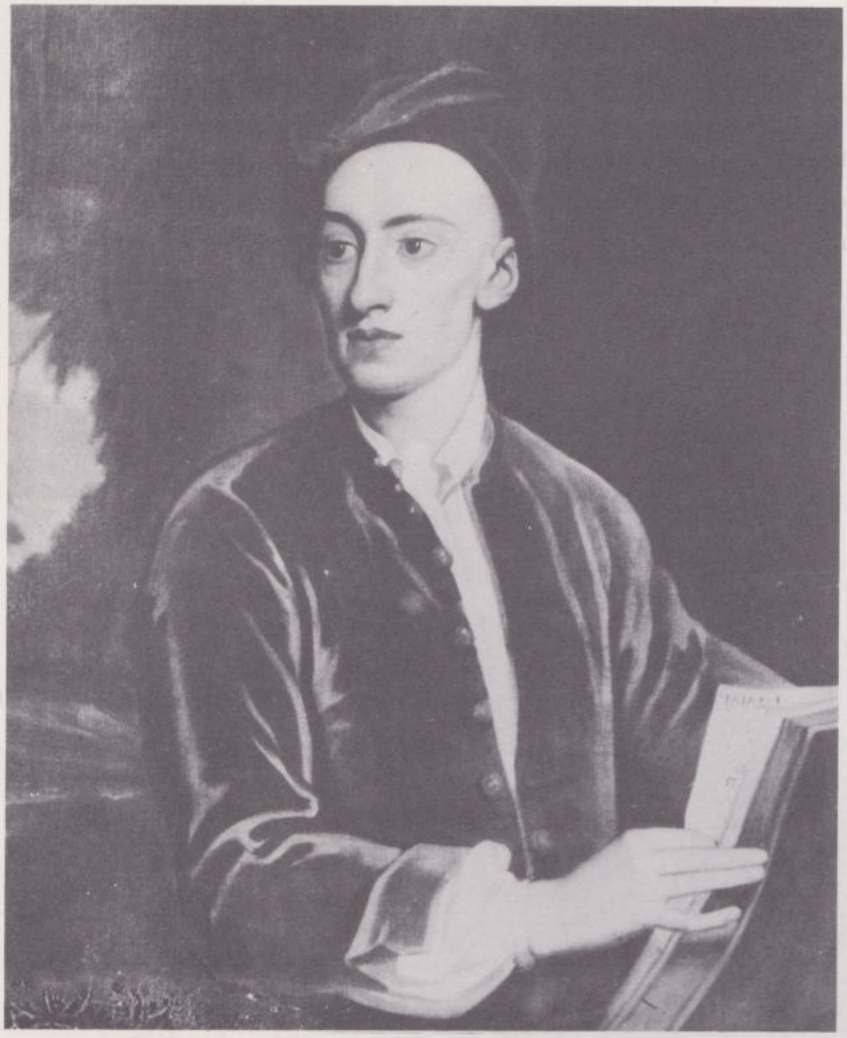


Fig. 5 Alexander Pope

Mean while declining from the Noon of Day,
The Sun obliquely shoots his burning Ray;
The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign,
And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine.

The Rape of the Lock, Canto 3, ll. 19–23.

Here, the rhymes not only underline the end of each line, they mark off the pairs of lines to which they belong. Such rhymed pairs are called *couplets*. There is a noticeable pause between each couplet, which becomes an ordered and secure unit of meaning distinct from its whole context. (That is why, incidentally, people tend to know Pope's work in couplets, rather than longer passages.)

4.2 To underline this 'stopping' effect of couplet rhymes, contrast the movement of the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, which Milton composed in *unrhymed* or *blank verse*, precisely because he objected to the stopping effect of rhyme.

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe
With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of *Chaos*.

John Milton (1608–1674), *Paradise Lost*, Book I, ll. 1–10

Fig. 6 John Milton

Milton has a weighty subject to 'sing' about, whose various aspects must be mentioned separately, but in a way that indicates how each is related to the others. So he uses a complicated verse paragraph made up of several clauses. This allows the parts of the theme to be distinguished, but holds them together in a single sentence. The stopping effect of end-rhyme would continually interrupt this effect.

4.3 A useful way to begin thinking about end-rhyme, then, is to see it as a form of emphasis. I will try to demonstrate this more concretely by analysing the second pair of lines from the quotation by Pope. You will remember from the discussion of rhythm that its most general function is to set up a pattern of expectation in the reader's or listener's mind. (RHYTHM 3.0.) So, having grasped the pattern of Pope's couplets of five stresses per line, we read:

> The HUNgry JUDges SOON the SENtence SIGN,
> And WRETCHes HANG that JURy-(MEN) may . . .
> . . . DINE.

(I have put '-MEN' in brackets because it seems less heavily stressed than the other syllables. We saw this kind of variation in RHYTHM 5.5.) Do you see how the rhythmic pattern leads you to expect a fifth strong stress after 'may'? One effect of the rhyme word is to *reinforce* the sense of rhythmic expectation being satisfied. Once we know we are reading end-rhymed couplets, the sound of the rhyme is in our memories. We therefore expect both a fifth strong stress and a word that sounds like 'SIGN'. Substitute another sound and the effect is immediate.

The HUNgry JUDges SOON the SENtence SIGN,
And WRETCHes HANG that JURy-MEN may . . .
. . . EAT.

Now look again at the blank verse lines from *Paradise Lost*. The rhythmic pattern is similar: there are five stresses per line, and the usual tendency to place a stronger emphasis on the word that fills up the position of the fifth stress. (Milton, though, is less regular than Pope in his handling of this rhythm.)

Of MANS FIRST disoBEDience (AND) the FRUIT
Of (THAT) forBIDden TREE, whose MORtal TASTE
Brought DEATH (IN)to the WORLD, and ALL our WOE,

The end-words 'fruit', 'taste' and 'woe' are strongly emphasised, as befits the theme. (Satan brought death into human experience when he persuaded Eve to eat the apple.) But because no expectation of a rhyme has been set up, its lack is not noticed: on the contrary, once we recognise that Milton is writing blank verse, we expect the rhythm to *move forward* from line to line.

5.0 Rhyme, then, has to do with emphasis, but what has that got to do with *meaning*? Emphasis is crucial to any meaningful use of language. Just listen to your own or any member of your family's voice. Varying the emphasis on particular words is a highly sensitive and discriminating tool of communication. We have already seen that rhythm in poetry elaborates and organises the stress patterns of normal speech. The interaction of rhyme with rhythm is one of its devices for achieving the kind of meaningful emphasis which characterises ordinary linguistic usage. Look at this example:

Swans sing before they die – 'twere no bad thing
Should certain persons die before they sing.

S. T. Coleridge (1772–1834)

Scan the lines.

My scansion gives: swans, sing, die, no, thing; cer-, per-, die, -fore, sing.

The first line has two variant feet in the manner discussed under RHYTHM 5.6. The position for unstressed syllables has a word that demands some stress: *swans*, *'twere*. Also, the second foot (*before*) sounds awkward if its second syllable is heavily stressed, because of the unavoidable stress on *swans*. The second line is regular.

In reading the second line, then, we have been prepared for a fifth stress.

Swans sing before they die – 'twere no bad thing
Shouldıcertain persons die before they . . .
. . . sing.

Remove the last word, and the expectation is frustrated. And the rhyme word reinforces this; *thing* leads us to expect a similar sound at the end of the next line. When it comes, it reinforces the rhythmic effect. The question then is: what has this heavy emphasis on *sing* to do with the meaning?

The couplet is a gibe against bad singers, so that an emphasis on 'sing' underlines exactly the activity Coleridge wants to mock.

5.1 (a) Two other devices work to the same end and are worth mentioning as an illustration of the way different devices of meaning co-operate to a common purpose. There is an *internal rhyme*. What is it? What does it contribute?

The internal rhyme is *sing/thing* in the first line. It works by linking up with the end-rhyme effect, associating *thing* with *sing*, so that the latter is somewhere in our memory as we approach the end of the second line. This assists the emphasis already achieved by other means.

5.1 (b) The other device has to do with word-arrangement, a kind of patterning to be discussed more fully in the next section. But this is a useful introductory example. The first line has

Swans sing before they die

Before acts as a sort of pivot connecting the two sentences *swans sing* and they *die* – and *sing* and *die* are the two key ideas in the couplet. Now look at the second line.

Persons die before they sing

The same structure in reverse. When, in the second line, we reach the words *die before*, they evoke the pattern of the first line, and lead us by another route to expect the word *sing* to complete that pattern. If we stop thinking of the meaning of *sing* and *die*, and see them as one-syllabled words within the balanced phrase, they become equivalent terms. The phrasing *die-before-sing/sing-before-die* is in itself a small rhythmic unit within the larger one, which moreover, *carries the key satirical point of the couplet*. So its effect assists those achieved by rhythm, end-rhyme and internal rhyme.

5.2 Briefly to sum up then: the couplet illustrates the connection between rhyme, managed emphasis, and meaning. It also illustrates that its wit is connected with the verbal and sound patterning. And you will find this a regular feature of witty or satirical verse.

6.0 Here is another example to try your hand on, like the last, but complicated by a pun.

When I am dead, I hope it may be said:
'His sins were scarlet, but his books were read'.

Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953)

Ignore the pun on *read* for the moment, and work your way through these questions.

(a) Which are the stressed words, or syllables?

(b) What is the relation between the rhythm and the end-rhyme *said/read*?

(c) What other device already familiar to you from earlier discussion contributes to the effect of the rhythm-plus-end-rhyme?

(d) What word does Belloc make the key-word? Why?

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Fig. 7 Hilaire Belloc

DISCUSSION

(a) The stressed words are: I, dead, hope, said: sins, scar-, books, read.

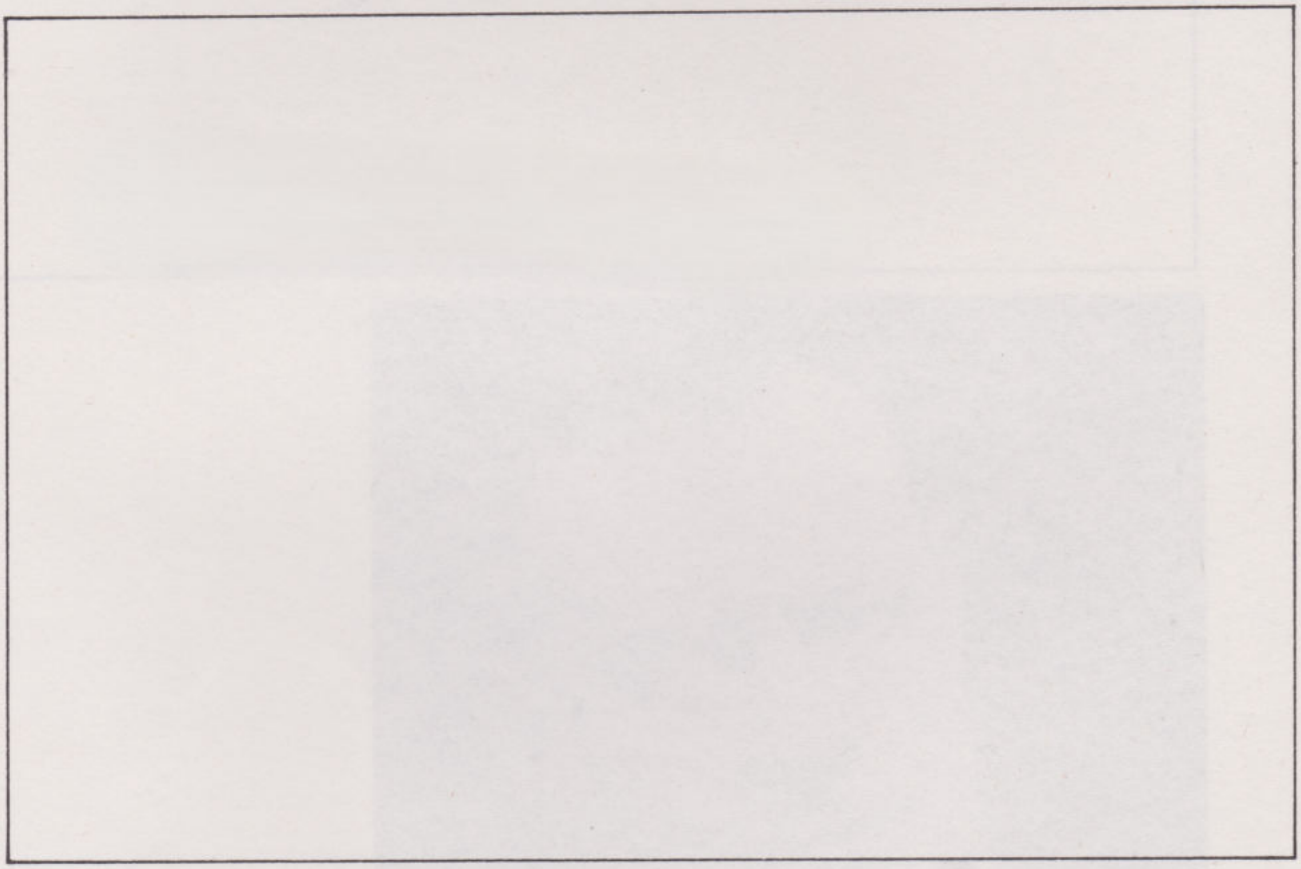
(b) The stress pattern emphasises *read. said* prepares us for a similar sound at the end of the second line, reinforcing the emphasis created by the rhythm.

(c) Internal rhyme in the first line (*dead/said*) adds emphasis to the end-rhyme effect in (b).

(d) Belloc wants to be remembered as a writer whose books were actually *read*, and not just ignored, or, like those of the philosopher David Hume, 'dropt stillborn from the press'. So, *read* is the key-word of the couplet, and requires strong emphasis.

If you haven't got the substance of these points right, and especially (a), (b) and (d), *you ought to go back over the whole of this paragraph and the previous paragraph.*

6.1 Finally, there is the pun on *read*, probably more effective than either rhyme or rhythm in making Belloc's point. A pun exploits the fact that the same sound can have two different meanings. Here, the two meanings are the colour *red*, and the past participle of the verb *to read*. How does it serve Belloc's purpose?



It concentrates attention on the most important word in the couplet. Of the two possible meanings, the reader must choose the one that makes sense. The word *scarlet* has already introduced into the line the idea of a red colour. The line even sounds as if it might be taking the form:

'His socks were scarlet, but his shirt was red.'

Choosing the meaning *read*, rather than *red*, involves conscious effort to dispel the ambiguity of the pun.

7.0 Rhyme effects are not usually as obvious as in these examples which are useful mainly for discussion purposes. More often than not, the pattern of emphasis is subtle and elusive so that beyond noticing it, the meaning is hard to express. But if we go back to the Pope couplet, we can see a specific connection between rhyme and meaning.

> The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign,
> And Wretches hang that Jury-men may dine.

Write brief answers to these questions:

(a) Who sign the death-sentences?

(b) Why do they sign them?

(c) Who are about to dine?

(d) What will happen as a result?

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Now what do you notice about this rhyme?

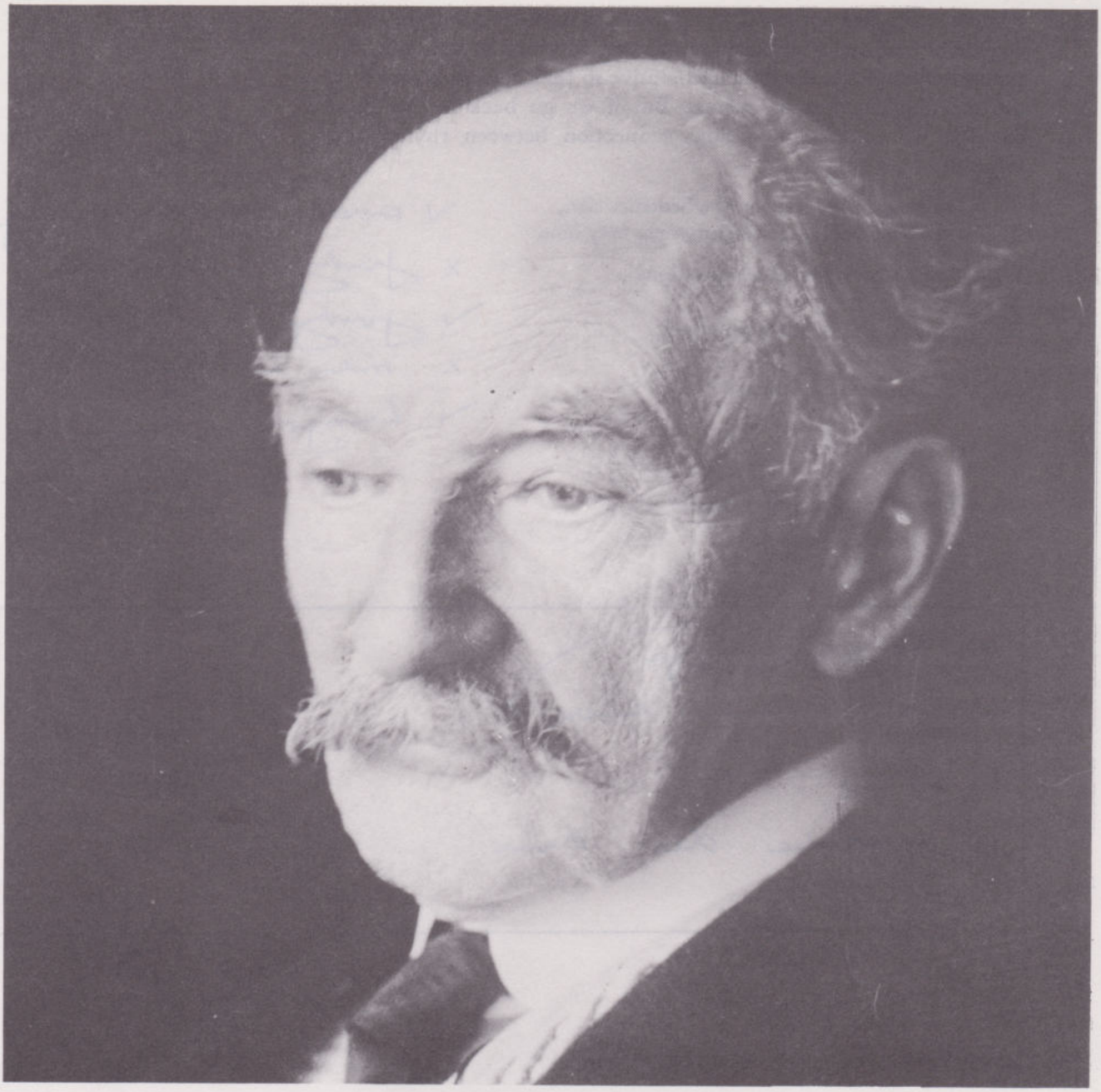


Fig. 8 Thomas Hardy

DISCUSSION

(a), (b). The judges; because they are hungry.
(c), (d). The jurymen; wretches will hang.

Do you see the connection? Each line shows a similar situation. Some people are going to hang because others with legal authority are hungry. This sense-link between the lines is reinforced by the sound-link *sign/dine*, which in itself enforces the satirical connection between justiciaries acting not on legal grounds, but because they want food.

7.1 There are examples of *internal half-rhyme* and *alliteration* that bear on the satirical point. Write down the pairs of words.

*hung*ry/*hang* is the half-rhyme; *judges/jurymen* is the alliteration. *soon/sentence/sign* also alliterate, but there is not the same direct link with the meaning, as the connection between judges and jurymen.

8.0 Here is another example.

CHRISTMAS: 1924

'Peace upon earth!' was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We've got as far as poison-gas.

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

What is the connection between the theme of the poem and the second pair of rhymes?

DISCUSSION

The rhyme *mass/gas* juxtaposes the two words which summarise Hardy's main point, the contrast between the pious aspirations associated with Christmas, and the reality represented by the use of poison gas in the 1914–18 war. Here the sound-link underlines not a similarity in meaning as in the Pope couplet, but a sardonic contrast.

8.1 Now, re-read 2.4. Which Owen rhyme shows an effect like *mass/gas*?

The third.

9.0 The use of rhymes to reinforce irony provides a rich field for illustrating the connection between rhyme and meaning. Consider the effect of this couplet:

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

The speaker is thinking of a declaration of love that he might make to a lady after having afternoon tea with her. What is the effect of the rhyme?

DISCUSSION

It juxtaposes *crisis*, the serious issue of declaring his love, with *ices*, and by association back through the line, with *tea* and *cakes*. The effect is deflationary, reinforcing the implication that his passion was likely to be weakened by the meal. The couplet is from a poem by T. S. Eliot: 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', where the speaker expresses much self-mockery and ironic resignation about his failures. The effect of the rhyme partly depends on the mood of the poem. It would be worth looking up if you are not entirely convinced. You will find it in Eliot's *Collected Poems, 1909–1935*, Faber and Faber, 1936, pp. 11–15.

10.0 One final and different example. Compare these two passages.

> Truth stands on a huge, cragged, steep hill, and he that will reach her must go about and about, and so win what the suddenness of the hill makes difficult, its summit.

about and about means *round and round.*
win means *gain*, *suddenness* means *steepness.*

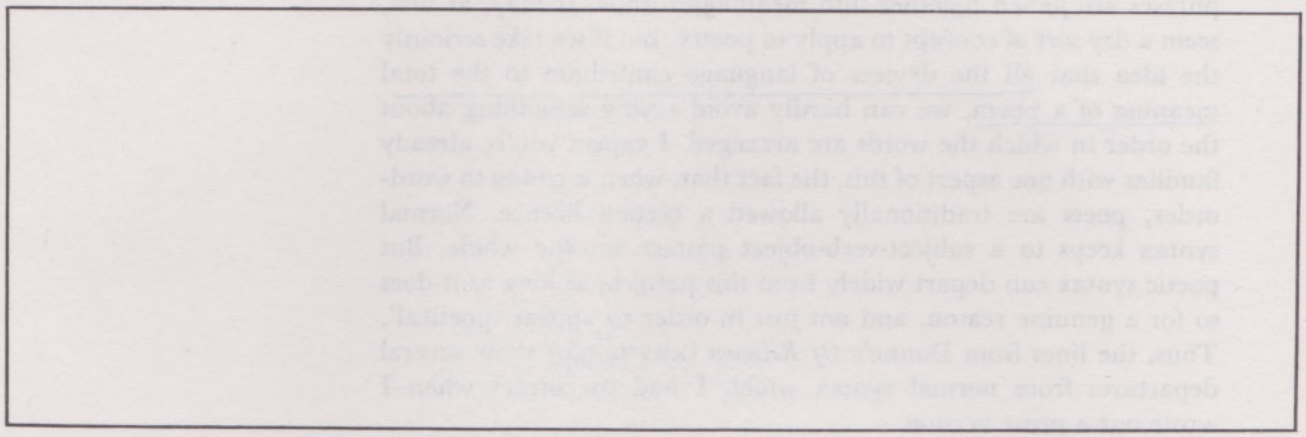
> On a huge hill,
> Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
> Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
> And what the hills suddenness resists, winne so.
>
> John Donne (1572–1631), Satyre: *Of Religion.*

The second extract is from Donne's poem. (You will find the whole text in *The Metaphysical Poets*, Penguin, 1957, edited by Helen Gardner, p. 48.) The first is my prose rearrangement and part-paraphrase. What contribution to the effect of the verse is made by the rhyme *hill/will*? (Remember the usefulness of reading poems aloud, and the fact that the end of the line tends to enforce a slight pause.)

DISCUSSION

(a) The effect is linked to the rhythm, so we had better get the stress pattern clear. The stressed words/syllables are: huge, hill; crag-, steep, Truth, stands, (hee), will; reach, -bout, must, -bout, goe; what, hills, sud- (or sudden-), -sists, winne. Five stresses per line, but with variations, particularly in the second line where 'hee' almost makes an extra stress. The intention seems to be to create a feeling of labour and effort by cramming the line with full stresses and double-consonant words.

(b) Couplet rhyme, you will remember, co-operates with the stress-pattern to produce particularly strong emphases on the second rhyme word, in this case *will*. If, in your own discussion you got stuck, or haven't seen that a strong emphasis on *will* is an effect of the rhymed version, don't read any further for the moment. Go back to the verse and see if you can now describe the connection between its over-all meaning and the effect of this rhyme.



(c) The point of the lines is to convey the determined effort needed by someone who wants to reach the Truth – seen as the summit of a steep, craggy mountain, only reached by laborious clambering and lengthy detours. The rhyme produces a heavy emphasis on *will* – the quality of mind needed if the top of the mountain is to be reached. Notice how the effect is continued in the next line, with its heavy stresses on each *about*; and in the last line when after *resists*, the rhythm relaxes in *WINNE/so*. Notice too the effect of the second rhyme *GOE/so*. The first rhyme word is stressed, the second unstressed, so that *WINNE* remains prominent.

10.1 An appreciation of the *hill/will* rhyme then takes us to the central meaning of the lines in the sense that they *dramatise* the kind of moral effort which they are discussing. You will remember that rhythmic effects are often specifically *dramatic* (RHYTHM 4.1). This is a case in point, but without the rhyme the rhythmic effect here would be much less striking.

11.0 The main points covered in this section were:

(a) definition and illustration of different types of rhyme;
(b) definition and illustration of related sound patterns (assonance, alliteration);
(c) the interaction of rhyme with rhythm as a way of creating emphasis;
(d) ways in which rhymes can reinforce meaning.

11.1 What you should more generally have grasped is that rhyme plays a significant part in the organisation of poems, that it is not just a trick or superficial sound effect. Rhyme effects are very various, and always related closely to their role in particular contexts of meaning. Rhymes can only be called 'bad' if they contribute nothing to the whole poem. You should at this point have gained some experience in recognising the meaningful effect of 'good' rhymes.

SYNTAX

1.0 We've already seen that rhythm is connected with word-order, and what I want to discuss in this section is word-order at its most general, that is to say, *syntax*. The term means 'arrangement' and, as applied to language, it refers to the ways in which words and phrases are joined together into meaningful units. It may, at first, seem a dry sort of concept to apply to poetry, but if we take seriously the idea that all the devices of language contribute to the total meaning of a poem, we can hardly avoid saying something about the order in which the words are arranged. I expect you're already familiar with one aspect of this, the fact that, when it comes to word-order, poets are traditionally allowed a certain licence. Normal syntax keeps to a subject-verb-object pattern on the whole. But poetic syntax can depart widely from this pattern, as long as it does so for a genuine reason, and not just in order to appear 'poetical'. Thus, the lines from Donne's *Of Religion* (RHYME 9.0) show several departures from normal syntax which I had to correct when I wrote out a prose version.

On a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands . . .

Donne

Truth stands on a huge, cragged and steep hill . . .

Prose version

These departures from normal syntax were purposeful, as we discovered by examining the rhythmic effect which they led to. Syntactical arrangement entered into the way the rhythm *dramatised* the quality of mind which Donne was discussing. This close connection between syntax and rhythm will recur in some of the examples.

2.0 Knowing any language involves, amongst other things, becoming familiar with the usual ways of grouping words into meaningful units. Usually these units are sentences, that is to say, they have a subject and verb. But they need not be. A sign reading 'No Admittance' is not a sentence, since it lacks a verb, but is perfectly meaningful. (Contrast 'Admittance No', which could only be made meaningful by introducing punctuation marks: 'Admittance? No!') Now this assumption that certain ways of arranging words are *normal* has an important effect. It means that we read with half-conscious expectations about what constitutes meaningful word-order, so that we are always forecasting the probable word-orders we are likely to meet on the basis of what we have just read. To take a simple case:

The went yesterday to I

This is not a meaningful group of words, because it does not fall into a syntactical pattern normal in English usage. Let us then rearrange them:

Yesterday I went to the

This is a meaningful grouping of the words, but it is an incomplete meaning, because the verb 'went to' requires an object (contrast the verb 'went'). Once the structure of this word-grouping has been

grasped the mind projects various possible completions, e.g.

station, town, garden, cupboard, tree, bicycle.

These would all provide satisfactory complete sentences, but two of them are a little odd:

Yesterday I went to the tree/bicycle.

They make a kind of sense, but the total meaning is not wholly self-explanatory. Here are some even more puzzling examples:

knife, ceiling, slate, feather.

Do any of these make normally meaningful sentences?

I would say not. In projecting possible completions of the incomplete sentence, therefore, such words are ruled out, because the verb 'went to' will only function as a verb-with-object under certain conditions. It is not *impossible* for 'went to' to refer to 'knife, ceiling, etc.', but so much further explanation is needed that the mind is not likely to select them.

Finally let us add a list of even more outlandish completions:

electron, year, hope, physiology.

None of these make possible sense.

2.1 Thus, there are three classes of terms which have been considered. In reverse order: nonsensical, difficult to make sense of, making good sense. Knowledge of the *syntactical rule* that 'went to' requires an object, combined with knowledge of the *meaning* of 'went to' which is such that with certain terms it cannot function in its normal syntactical way, leads the mind to project a limited number of completions for the sentence. In a word, it excludes some possibilities, but admits others.

2.2 Here, is an example from a recent advertisement by the Post Office. It reads in large type:

YOUR POST OFFICE WILL.

If you do not notice the full stop, and perhaps even if you do, this is likely to make you project the rest of the verb of which 'will' seems to be a part.

Your Post Office will deliver your letters at 9 a.m.
fine you if you don't pay your TV licence.
close at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays.

But there *is* a full stop, and when you absorb this, together with the fact that no completion is immediately visible, you realise that 'will' might be a noun meaning a legal document giving instructions about the disposal of a dead person's property. In this sense, just as 'No Admittance' is meaningful despite its lack of a verb, so is 'Your Post Office Will.' But what kind of 'will' is that? There is the same uncertainty as in 'Yesterday, I went to the tree'. The eye then examines the rest of the poster – which says in small print further down:

Will what?
Will tell you all about S.A.Y.E.

After all, 'will' *was* part of a verb: its potential ambiguity was simply made use of to catch your attention. But the trick will only work for somebody who has grasped basic English syntax.

3.0 What is the effect of this characteristic of syntax? It introduces what might be called *momentum* into the act of reading continuous

prose or verse. And this is an effect very valuable to poets. Syntactical momentum can be guided, increased, checked, baffled, accumulated. It is a powerful device for engaging the reader's attention, for drawing him into the *experience* created in the verse. Here is an example from a poet:

A FARM PICTURE

Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
A sun-lit pasture field, with cattle and horses feeding;
And haze, and vista, and the far horizon, fading away.

Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

Read the poem carefully; and absorb its meaning. What is the outstanding feature of the syntax?

DISCUSSION

Verbs usually have to do with actions. (The major exception to this is the verb 'to be' which reports states, or predicates qualifying attributes. Thus: 'There is a happy land' reports a state of affairs, while 'There is a happy land, far, far away' qualifies it in relation to other conceivable 'happy lands' that might be just next door.) Whitman's lines have *no verb*. I think we can trace the effect of this by noting the places where we might expect a verb. There are two places where I realise I *have* expected one by finding that Whitman does not supply it: after 'field', and after 'feeding'.

My first interpretation reads:

Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
A sun-lit pasture field . . .
. . . (is or does something)

My second interpretation simply adds the next words:

. . . pasture field, with cattle and horses feeding . . .
. . . (is or does something)

A forward momentum is generated by both expectations, and the effect is to carry the mind in the direction Whitman wants it carried, *through* the barn-door, towards the pasture, and the feeding animals. This momentum is checked at the beginning of the third line, because, when to the whole of the second line, still being thought of as the subject of a possible verb, is added another subject ('and haze'), the possibility of completion with a verb becomes very remote. What possible completions come to mind for a subject made up of a *field* and a *haze*? Perhaps 'is revealed'? It may make sense, but it's a lame conclusion.

The point at which my expectation about a verb finally relaxes is after 'vista'. What happens then? The initial momentum has been dissipated. What replaces it is the recognition that *no verb* means *no action* and no attributes predicated for the subject, and that all

Whitman asks of me is to *look*. And, of course, that leads to the further recognition: that looking is precisely what I have been doing. So the mind is carried beyond the feeding animals, to the haze, then the vista, then the far horizon, gradually expanding and relaxing into the spacious, ordered, liberating scene.

3.1 To sum up: the initial momentum generated by the expectation of a verb is used to start the mind moving out of the barn into the scene; then it is checked, and transformed into a calmer act of attention. The reader does not have to do anything to share this experience, nor is any attitude towards the experience going to be placed before him (such as a remark that the scene is pleasant, or morally improving, or politically undesirable). All he has to do is to contemplate it. This effect is created not by rhyme, and not by rhythm, but by *syntax*.

3.2 One final point. The accumulative effect of 'and' is very useful to poets, and worth attending to. Here it is used to extend the act of attention which has been started in the first two lines; to extend it, and gradually to slow it down as the mind moves out to the invisible horizon. You will see how important it is, if you try to cut it out, and substitute a rhythmic pause.

4.0 The Whitman poem is a simple example of *dramatic* syntax, and what it dramatises is an act of attention, which we must follow if we are to take what the poem has to give. It is not 'description' simply, because when something is described, the reader does not participate, he simply observes. The point of Whitman's lines is to engage or involve the reader in the experience of enjoying the scene, of the feelings of calm, order, and freedom that go with it. Here then is a more extended example of dramatic syntax.

. . . But the time, when first
From that low Dell, steep up the stony Mount
I climb'd with perilous toil and reach'd the top,
Oh! what a goodly scene! *Here* the bleak mount,
The bare bleak mountain speckled thin with sheep;
Grey clouds, that shadowing spot the sunny fields;
And river, now with bushy rocks o'er browed,
Now winding bright and full, with naked banks;
And seats, and lawns, the Abbey and the wood,
And cots, and hamlets, and faint city-spire;
The Channel *there*, the Islands and white sails,
Dim coasts, and cloud-like hills, and shoreless Ocean –
It seem'd like Omnipresence! God, methought,
Had built him there a Temple . . .

S. T. Coleridge, *Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement.*

Read the lines carefully, then examine the syntax. How many sentences are there? Do you notice anything particularly remarkable about the syntax? Can you relate what you notice to the effect of the lines?

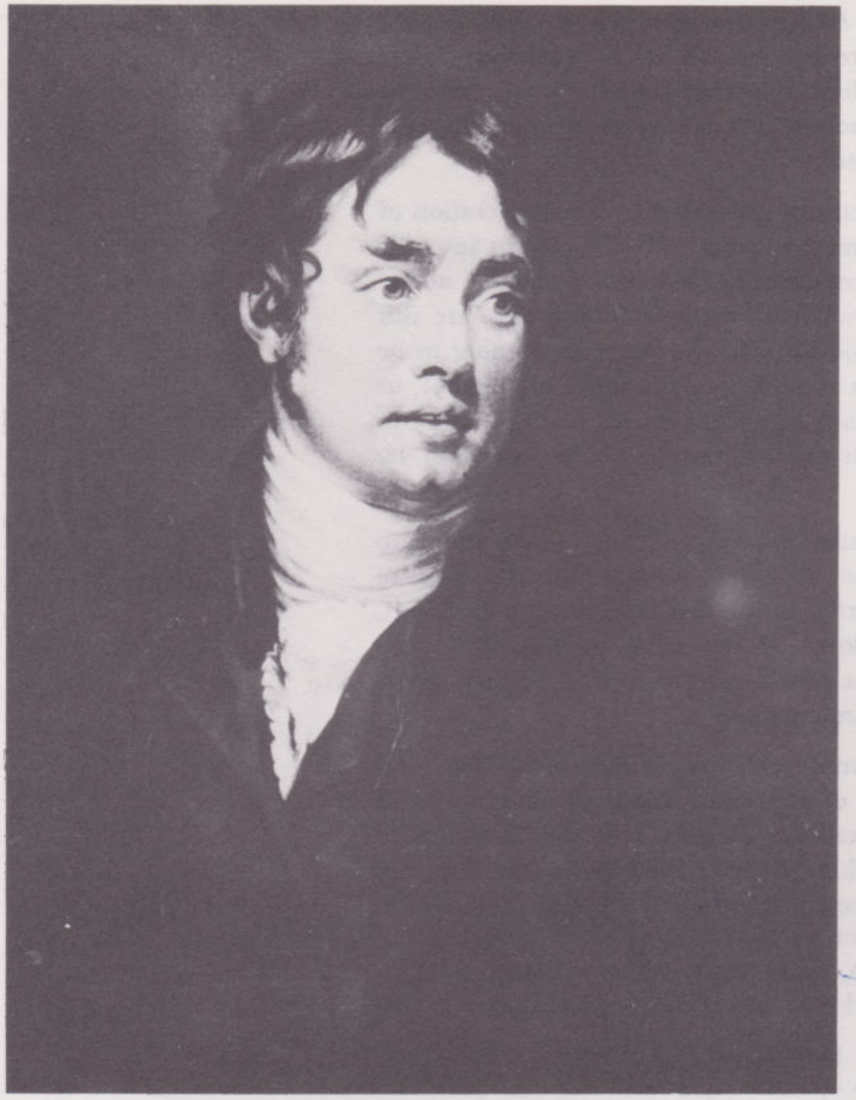


Fig. 9 S. T. Coleridge

DISCUSSION

There are only four sentences: the relevant verbs are 'climb'd', 'reach'd', 'seem'd', and 'built'. The point about the syntax is that lines 4–9 amount to a single composite subject for the verb 'seem'd'. You might also have noticed the use of 'and' to build up this subject. If you failed to see any of this, look again at the lines with the syntactical points in mind, and see if you can connect them with the effect of the passage.

The effect is not unlike that of the Whitman passage. The first two sentences recount the journey up the mountain, then when the top is reached, there are no more verbs of action, merely a list of observations about which nothing is immediately said. The relation of each observation to the next dramatises the shifting attention of the observer, and therefore invites the reader not just to watch, but to enter into the act of attention. Note first the italicised *Here*: we see what is immediately before the eyes, the bare mountain top, the sheep. Then the eye lifts to the clouds, drops to their shadows on the plain far below, moves to the fields, then down the river noting different scenes and various human habitations, then to the channel – emphasised with *There* – to islands, boats, distant hills and finally the far ocean. (The actual scene is the Bristol Channel observed from a hill near what is now Weston-Super-Mare.) It is only when we have entered into the richness, variety and sense of infinity in

which the act of observation ends, that Coleridge proceeds to attribute something to the scene. He calls this 'Omnipresence': God present in the whole world. And this leads him to his fourth sentence. But it is the syntax of the third sentence that concerns us. It dramatises the act of attention that leads Coleridge to his major idea. Without this dramatisation the idea would remain a mere statement, and not the culmination of a particular experience.

5.0 You will remember that while, for convenience sake, poetry provides most of our examples, nevertheless, many features of poetic language are equally to be found in the prose developed by novelists. So here's a syntax example from *The Rainbow*. There is a scene early in Chapter 4, in which Will and Anna Brangwen harvest corn sheaves under an autumn moon. It is a courting scene. As each collects a sheaf of corn and brings it to be stacked the rhythm of their work gradually reveals itself to the reader as the inner rhythm of their feelings, drawing more and more closely into intimate harmony. Here are three paragraphs from the scene. The first begins with a question Will is asking himself.

> Why was there always a space between them, why were they apart? Why, as she came up under the moon, would she halt and stand off from him? Why was he held away from her? His will drummed persistently, darkly, it drowned everything else.
>
> Into the rhythm of his work there came a pulse and a steadied purpose.[1] He stopped, he lifted the weight, he heaved it towards her, setting it as in her, under the moonlight space.[2] And he went back for more.[3] Ever with increasing closeness he lifted the sheaves and swung striding to the centre with them, ever he drove her more nearly to the meeting, ever he did his share, and drew towards her, overtaking her.[4] There was only the moving to and fro in the moonlight, engrossed, the swinging in the silence, that was marked only by the splash of sheaves, and silence, and a splash of sheaves.[5] And ever the splash of his sheaves broke swifter, beating up to hers, and ever the splash of sheaves recurred monotonously, unchanging, and ever the splash of his sheaves beat nearer.[6]
>
> Till at last, they met at the shock, facing each other, sheaves in hand. And he was silvery with moonlight, with a moonlit, shadowy face that frightened her. She waited for him.

In the second paragraph, I have numbered the groups of words between full-stops for easy reference. When you have read the passage carefully, and grasped its general import, try to answer these questions:

(a) 'His will drummed insistently': what intention begins to dominate Will's actions from this point forwards?
(b) What syntactical differences do you notice between 2 and 3 taken together, and 4 and 5, in the second paragraph?
(c) What is the effect of the syntactical arrangement of 4, 5, and 6 in the second paragraph?

(a)

(b)
(c)

5.1 **DISCUSSION**

(a) His intention to alter the rhythm of their work so that when he brings his sheaves to the stack, his arrival will coincide with hers.

(b) A full discussion would reveal several differences, but the main one you should have noticed is that 1 to 3 are relatively simple and straightforward, while the succession of verbs ('stopped', 'lifted', 'heaved', etc.) shows the new decisiveness in his work-rhythm. Then in 4 to 6, a pattern of repetition develops in relation to the word 'ever', while each sentence unit is complicated by clauses and appositional phrases introduced by 'and'.

If you haven't noticed this, or succeeded in formulating the difference reasonably clearly, then go back to the paragraph, and check it against this comment.

(c) The change in syntax alters the rhythm of the prose. If you haven't noticed this, read the second paragraph aloud. The point of this new rhythm is to convey to the reader that the new determination in Will's work is *an expression of his inner being*. He is not just working to bring in the harvest, but in relation to Anna. (Notice the phrase 'he heaved it towards her, *setting it as in her*' in 2.) If you feel uncertain about this point, you should turn to the context of the whole chapter.

5.2 This, then, is a case of syntactical changes being responsible for a change in rhythm which dramatises an inner state of feeling. Again, the rhythmic effect is intended to help the reader enter into the quality of Will's experience. A device of language which is responsible for that is clearly worth attending to.

6.0 The interaction of syntax and rhythm is a reminder that the different devices of poetic language work together, not in isolation from each other. The examples of syntax I want now to discuss are complicated in a similar way. Their effects are intertwined with effects deriving from metaphors and similes, devices of language which will only be examined in the next section. For the moment, then, you may have to take some of what follows on trust. But if the points about metaphor and simile cause any difficulty then you should come back to this section after you have completed the next.

7.0 Consider this line from a poem which we will discuss more fully in the section on Tone.

The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

Write down a brief account of what you think this line means.

It is a line full of suggestion, but here are some main points: the end of the day; a feeling of weariness and exhaustion ('burn-out'); the implication of many such days; with, more distantly, the notion of burnt-out fires, burnt-out cigarettes, smoking chimneys, or piles of leaves burning smokily in city squares (this was urged upon me by a group of students discussing the poem, but I am not altogether convinced).

7.1 Now having grasped the general import of the line, let us look at it more formally. None of the words is difficult or unfamiliar, but they are unexpectedly arranged. Thus, if you came across the phrase

The burnt-out ends of . . .

how would you *expect* it to be completed? Here is a list of possibilities to choose from. Mark those that seem *possible* to you:

(i) Typography
(ii) Electric fires
(iii) United Nations
(iv) Sticks
(v) Fear
(vi) Beer mugs
(vii) Cigarettes

I have listed three groups of possible completions on the principle of the example in 2.0. Classify the list under these headings:

REASONABLE

POSSIBLE BUT PUZZLING

NOT POSSIBLE

DISCUSSION

Nos. (iv), (vii) are reasonable.
Nos. (ii), (vi) are possible, but puzzling.
Nos. (i), (iii), (v) seem to me not possible.

In other words, you should have marked not more than four out of the whole list. You might want to claim that (vi) is impossible, but while it's not very likely, the phrase 'The burnt-out ends of beer mugs' is a *possible* completion: glass does burn. Similarly, 'The

burnt-out ends of electric fires' might fairly be called reasonable, but I find it puzzling, since I am uncertain what would constitute the *end* of an electric fire. So it is a less *likely* meaning than cigarettes or sticks.

7.2 What is the difference between the first two categories and the third? The first two categories are physical objects that can be burned, whereas numbers (i), (iii), and (v) are abstract entities or concepts, which have no physical existence. What this adds up to, then, is that the expectations generated by the phrase 'The burnt-out ends of . . .' involve physical objects which *can be burned.* And how does the poet actually complete the line? With 'days' – a term belonging to the class of objects that *cannot* be burned. How, therefore, do we have so little difficulty in understanding the line? Because we read it as implying a comparison or similitude between the ends of such days and something burnt-out, such as a fire, a stick, a cigarette. In other words, *the syntax generates an implied comparison.* Notice that 'end' is the key-word that makes this possible. If you re-write the phrase as:

> The longed-for ends of smoky days.

there is nothing at all surprising about this. 'End' is being used, as it quite commonly is, in a non-physical way. 'The end of the day' does not make us think of anything physical as in the phrase 'the end of the stick'. 'End', in fact, has both meanings, but linking it with 'burnt-out' brings its concrete *physical* sense to the fore. The syntactical device then concerns simply an adjective and noun. Take away the adjective, and the effect disappears, or replace it with another, and again the effect disappears. But with the appropriate adjective, a submerged comparison comes into play which greatly enriches the associative power of the line.

8.0 Another example of this interaction between syntax and implied comparison occurs in a poem you have already met in *The Artist and Society* (Unit 4), Blake's *London.* Here are verses two and three:

> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.
>
> How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
> Every blackening Church appalls;
> And the hapless Soldier's sigh
> Runs in blood down Palace walls.

Let me first remind you of the point which Arnold Kettle made about the second of the quoted verses (Unit 4, 6.6).

> This is an example of a highly condensed poetic image which operates through a complex web of associations. The 'hapless soldier' (like the chimney sweep) is immediately associated by the reader with the faces marked by weakness and woe which dominate Blake's view of London. He is one of many, and his sigh is a part of the general cry of pain and misery which arises from the city. Obviously a sigh cannot quite literally 'run in blood', but the association of the soldier's sigh with blood and of the two with the palace, the centre of authority in the state, are perfectly lucid. And, though the image operates on a deeper level than the purely visual, it has also great visual power. Just as the chimney and the Church are visually connected in the industrial landscape so here we get a strong visual image of a palace wall smeared with the blood of dead soldiers.

Arnold Kettle referred to the visual power of the concluding lines, but he also claimed that there is a deeper level of meaning. Let us see if we can approach this deeper level by way of the syntax of the last two lines.

8.1 Supposing you overheard the phrase:

> Runs in blood down palace walls

(not, I admit, the sort of thing that crops up often), and were left wondering about a *literal* subject for the verb 'runs in blood'. What would occur to you? Make a note of two or three possibilities before going on.

Did you find any that *made sense*? Presumably it would need to be a liquid. Water? Milk? Alcohol? Treacle? Strawberry jam? The truth is that the only subject for 'runs in blood' that makes sense is 'blood', which repeats the substance of the verb. Obviously we can say 'The blood runs down palace walls' or 'The palace wall runs in blood'. But the effect of adding 'down palace walls' to the verb makes it impossible to find a normal subject. *Something* runs in blood down palace walls – but we can't say what. And this absence of a literal subject is the syntactical point about these two lines, because it makes possible the boldly *metaphorical* subject 'the Soldier's sigh'. In other words, the metaphorical structure is closely connected with the basic syntax. Can you now say what these lines mean?

One way of trying to cover the many possibilities is this:

> The hapless soldier's sigh . . . is or does something which can be compared to or whose consequence is . . . blood running down palace walls.

In sum, the absence of a literal connection between subject and verb leaves open a very large number of possibilities. And this means that the relationship between the soldier and the palace is both intimate (the effect of words like 'sigh' and 'blood' ensure that) *and* unclarified.

8.2 Now why should Blake want such an effect? Is it mystery-mongering, or merely poetical flourish-theatrical, but empty? I think not. Blake's soldier is both victim of the society that makes him defend

(or attack) palaces, but in some sense he is a willing victim; 'hapless' and 'sigh' (perhaps of resignation to his state, perhaps his dying breath) express his helplessness, but he remains part of the system symbolised by 'palace walls'. Think how different the effect would be if it were the chimney-sweeper whose blood ran down the palace walls. He would be purely a victim. But the soldier dies upholding the system that kills him. He is a victim of the 'mind-forg'd manacles' of superstition and fear with which men imprison themselves. So, what I think this remarkable couplet provides is an intimate connection between the social system and the soldier's death which doesn't simplify Blake's tragic insight: *that men create the structures which paralyse their capacity for living*. No demon created this society, but '*mind*-forg'd manacles'. The soldier is sacrificed to the palace but it is a self-sacrifice. His death is laid at nobody's door. He just 'runs in blood'. And if in some way he is responsible for his own death, that is exactly what needs to be implied. The combination of syntax and metaphor here makes possible this complex meaning without any loss of vividness.

9.0 To end with a more straightforward example. It is from the book of *Ruth*, the subject of next week's work (Unit 10). Here are Ruth's words to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Having decided to return from Moab to Bethlehem-judah, Naomi has tried to persuade Ruth to stay in Moab which is her own country, but Ruth replies:

> Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.
>
> *Ruth*, ii, 16–17.

What do you notice about the syntax of some of these sentences? What is the connection between their syntax and the over-all effect of the passage?

DISCUSSION

(a) There are five examples of closely related syntactical structures linking 'I' (Ruth) and 'thy' (Naomi):

1 whither thou goest, I will go
2 where thou lodgest, I will lodge
3 thy people shall be my people
4 thy God (shall be) my God
5 where thou diest, I will die.

Nos. 1, 2 and 5 are identical in structure: where/whither-plus-verb . . . I-will-plus-verb; and nos. 3 and 4 are identical: thy-shall-my.

(b) The main effect is that this succession of sentences forges an identity between 'I' and 'thy' which concedes to Naomi the power to make the first move but insists that this entails Ruth's decision to do likewise. It creates the kind of inevitability necessary to persuade Naomi that there is no point in arguing any more.

Note too that, as in the case of the paragraph from *The Rainbow* (para. 6.0) this syntactical pattern is inseparable from an effect of rhythm.

10.0 The main point to take away from this section is that *the arrangement of words in a certain order is as powerful a device for the achievement of specific meanings as any other available to the poet.* Its power lies in that familiarity with syntactical rules which goes with understanding the English language. It enables the poet to organise things to his own purposes, by stealth. It is not necessary, or advisable, for a reader to be *continuously* conscious of these effects. But when a piece of writing seems to have unexpected power that you cannot trace to a particularly vivid complex of metaphors, or to subtle rhythms, the source may often be found to lie in syntactical structure.

METAPHOR AND SIMILE

1.0 In this section we will examine the role of metaphor and simile. Their central contribution to poetry has been recognised since Aristotle, and since the beginning of the nineteenth century has dominated formal criticism of poetry, while in recent years their contribution to the prose of novelists has been more and more emphasised. Indeed, of all the devices of language discussed in this unit, metaphor and simile most easily cross the formal boundary separating poetry and prose. Effects of rhyme, rhythm, and to a less extent, of syntax, are more extensive and significant in poetry, because they are closely connected with sound and verbal patterns. But metaphor and simile have to do with the *meaning* of words, not just their sound or stress characteristics. This also means that their effects are easier to discuss. We are no longer forced back on to an approximate language of the feelings. Later in the course in *Form and Meaning* (Units 15–16) you will study several poems and a short story specifically in relation to their metaphors, or – as metaphorical expressions are often called – their imagery. So the scope of this discussion will be limited to the general problem of how metaphors and similes work, how they achieve their effects, and why they seem to be so central in any discussion of poetry.

1.1 It is always useful to begin with a definition. 'Metaphor' comes from a Greek original meaning 'to transfer'. Its usual dictionary definition is:

> The application of a name to an object to which the name cannot *literally* be applied.

Thus (to use a very old chestnut): 'He was a lion in the fight'. 'He' being a man, cannot literally be called a 'lion'. This latter term has been *transferred* from its literal application to the animal. 'Lion' therefore functions as a metaphorical term.

1.2 But this simple definition doesn't take us far. What is the purpose of this transference of terms from literal to non-literal uses?

> A metaphor involves an act of comparison between the original object, to which the transferred term literally applies, and the object to which it has been transferred.

So, to say 'he was a lion in the fight' is *to make a comparison* between 'he' and the 'lion' in relation to the fight, and the point of making this comparison is to credit the fighting man with the characteristics of a lion. Now a lion has many characteristics. It is, for example, carnivorous. Does this metaphor mean that 'he' is carnivorous? Most lions have a tawny-brown coat, and all lions have tails. Do we mean that 'he has a tawny-brown skin and a tail'? Lions roar and growl. Do we mean that 'he' roars and growls? And so on . . . To all these questions you will have said no, and may (should!) be wondering what is the point of asking them, since everybody *knows* that to compare a fighting man with a lion is merely to say something about the brave, energetic and determined spirit in which the man fights. And certainly that is what the metaphor 'he was a lion in the fight' usually means. But I want to underline the fact that the comparison between two objects which a metaphor involves

also involves *an act of selection*: only *some* of the characteristics of the object which provides the metaphorical term ('lion') are being used in the comparison. In this case, virtually all the lion's animal characteristics are excluded, only its great strength and legendary fighting spirit are admitted. I will come back to this point, that *the act of comparison which a metaphor involves also means an act of selection.*

1.3 Finally, the difference between a metaphor and a simile is that a metaphor is an *implicit* comparison, and a simile an *explicit* comparison introduced by the word 'like' or 'as'. The simile form for the lion metaphor is:

He fought like a lion

The difference may seem trivial, a mere matter of phrasing, but it goes deeper than that, and though there is not space here to illustrate it, it needs to be mentioned. A metaphor only *implies* a comparison: we have to work out that the man resembles a lion. The actual word formation states not a comparison but *identity* ('he *was* a lion, etc.') and so glosses over the many ways in which the man and the lion are unlike. But a simile, being more explicit, admits to the ways in which the man is not like a lion. By saying only that he is *like* a lion, it holds the two elements in the comparison apart. (If you want to explore the difference between metaphor and simile, you will find a valuable discussion by Winifred Nowottny in *The Language Poets Use*, Athlone Press, 1965, pp. 49–71.)

1.4 To sum up, then, a metaphor is an implied comparison, a simile an explicit comparison, and any act of comparison involves an act of selection from the various attributes that the comparison brings into play.

2.0 Ordinary language is full of metaphors. Why? To take a recently invented example – journalists often describe the vehicles used for the exploration of the moon, 'moon-ships'. Can you say what point is being made in such a comparison?

The point is that the journeys through space are made to resemble the setting-off into the unknown associated with a journey across an ocean. So, by comparing the unfamiliar with the familiar, we make the unfamiliar more manageable. The transferred term 'ship' carries over into the new experience of space exploration some of the feelings attached to the heroic, dangerous achievements originally involved in the exploration of the earth's oceans. A writer's metaphorical extensions of language often have the same purpose: to extend our understanding of new kinds of experience, by adapting familiar language to a fresh use.

2.1 Before going on to the role of metaphor in literature, let us examine an example from ordinary speech. You might describe a man who'd let you down in some crisis with a variety of metaphorical expressions. You could describe him as 'wet', 'soft', or 'spineless', terms which respectively imply that the man has characteristics resembling water, some soft yielding object, or something without a spine, perhaps a jelly-fish. Probably you wouldn't think of any of these as particularly striking metaphors, but metaphors they clearly are. Or, you might describe him as 'a broken reed', 'a wet fish', or 'a long drink of water', and here there would be clearer awareness that you were using metaphors. In the last especially, the element of comparison is evident. Your listener would have to work out that 'a long drink of water' means something cold, wet, and a lot of it.

2.2 Now speech of this kind is usually thought of as more *effective* in conveying meaning than the more literal 'He is a weak character'. Yet, this is puzzling. Is there not a possibility of misunderstanding in using an expression like 'He is a wet fish' to mean 'He is a weak character'? Think about it as if it were unfamiliar, as it would have struck its first hearer who would have had to *work out* the terms of the comparison which relate to the man's character. Perhaps it can be defended as more vivid or 'concrete' in that 'wet fish' makes an immediate appeal to the senses lacking in 'weak character'. Yet even this raises difficulties. The point made by 'weak character' is abstract; it has nothing to do with the senses, but with an intellectual and moral assessment. How can an expression which appeals primarily to the senses be more successful in conveying an intellectual and abstract analysis?

2.3 The answer is two-fold. First, the mind responds to the appeal to direct experience in the term 'wet fish'; second, it proceeds to work out the comparison by selecting from the range of possible attributes in 'wet fish', those which may reasonably apply to a man. The qualities that count are: the wetness of the fish, and by implication its coldness: both unpleasant to the touch; then, its slipperiness and physical pliability; and lastly, the probability of it slipping or wriggling out of one's hands. So, the reason why such an expression is felt to be more effective is not *simply* because it appeals to the senses – the expression 'wet stone' does that – but because in pursuing the comparison the mind has to make an act of positive interpretation, that is to say – the act of selection referred to in 1.2, which excludes irrelevant aspects of the fish – its tail, eyes, gills, colour, etc. This demands *an exertion of energy from the interpreter which leads to a more complete grasp of the meaning*. The initial indirectness of the metaphor results paradoxically in a fuller understanding of the point being made.

2.4 There is one more element in a metaphorical expression not yet accounted for. Consider the two statements:

He is a weak character.
He is a wet fish.

Which of these statements best communicates what the speaker *feels* about the man in question? Think about this before going any further, and mark the appropriate sentence.

2.5 Surely the second. The metaphorical expression involves the mind in a situation which at once arouses feelings: 'a wet fish' is unpleasant to the touch, and this unpleasantness has to be grasped if the terms of the comparison are to reveal themselves. (Compare 'he is a *dry* fish', or the different meaning conveyed by 'he is a *cold* fish'.) The metaphorical expression thus conveys two types of meaning: (a) an *idea* which corresponds to 'weak character'; and (b) a *feeling* of hostility or disgust about such a character. Now the human situation of being let down in a crisis which leads to the assessment – 'weak character' – is also likely to lead to feelings of hostility or contempt. So, the metaphorical phrase expresses *more* of that total experience than 'weak character' because it expresses the feeling as well as the idea. This greater richness of meaning is the third reason why metaphorical expressions are judged to be a more effective kind of speech.

2.6 To sum up then. A metaphorical expression (a) makes a direct appeal to the senses, and is thus more vivid or 'concrete'; (b) it involves the mind in a positive act of interpretation in working out the terms of the comparison which leads it to a fuller grasp of the meaning; (c) it combines both an idea and a feeling, and so expresses *more* meaning than the non-metaphorical phrase.

3.0 Let us now apply this reasoning to a metaphor drawn not from ordinary speech, but from a poem by Dylan Thomas:

> 'When, like a running grave, time tracks you down . . .'

The phrase inside the simile, 'running grave', is a metaphor. Write down what you think the whole statement means.

DISCUSSION

Since a grave cannot literally run, an act of interpretation is called for. So, I would suggest: 'I feel as if the grave were running towards me', or literally, 'my life is passing very quickly and soon I will die'. Perhaps you'll remember meeting this sentiment under RHYTHM (8.0):

> My fugitive years are all hasting away
>
> (Cowper)
>
> When, like a running grave, time tracks you down
>
> (Thomas)

Thomas's line clearly involves the act of interpretation listed in point (b) of paragraph 2.6. What about point (a)? Is it more vivid than Cowper's line? Why?

Where 'wet fish' appeals to the sense of touch, 'running grave' appeals to the sense of sight. We see something running, whereas in Cowper's line, 'fugitive' and 'hasting' only *dimly* suggest movement, and only if we stop to think about it. (The words are nearly-dead metaphors: see below paragraph 4.1 (b).) What about point (c)? Does Thomas's line express feeling? What feeling, and how?

It expresses fear of death. I have suggested that we see *something* running (we cannot see a grave running, because this is impossible). So the very vagueness carries menace. Also, this something is connected with 'grave', its movement has the associations of the grave. And while the running movement is vaguely menacing because it is unidentifiable, it is also made more fearsome by the connection with 'grave'. This means that the *idea* of the line is intimately combined with Thomas's *feeling* about that idea. Which meets point (c) in the general definition. (Note that 'Time tracks you down', the other metaphor in the line, supports this.)

3.1 Of the three points about the way a metaphor works, I would like you now to reconsider point (b). It connects with a general point about poetic language that I have made several times in passing. Can you remember what it was? Try to complete this sentence:

The point of some devices of language in poetry is to encourage the reader to:

.....

.....

DISCUSSION

The point is that works of literature do not simply make statements, or expound points of view, or even make appeals to the feelings. They encourage the reader to enter into a re-creation of experiences, and many devices of poetic language work to this end. (RHYTHM 4.0; RHYME 9.0; SYNTAX 3.0, 4.0, 5.0.) Metaphor has earned its traditional esteem with literary critics because of all the devices so far discussed it is the most subtle and flexible for this purpose of enabling the reader to enter into the experience of the work. The clue to its power is contained in point (b) of our definition. Faced with a metaphor, the mind has to make a positive act of interpretation, and this means immersing itself in the various aspects of the situation introduced by the comparison. Without such an immersion, it cannot proceed to the act of selection necessary to make sense of the comparison. In the case of 'running grave', we have to *work out* in what sense a grave can be said to run before the metaphor conveys its terror. We have to enter *into* the imaginary situation, apparently grotesque and unreal, but actually a powerful way of saying 'My fugitive years are all hasting away and the thought frightens me very much' – before its meaning will work for us.

The poet William Blake once wrote:

> That which may be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients consider'd *what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act.* I name Moses, Solomon, Esop, Homer, Plato.

The roster of ancients is certainly impressive, but I quote the remark on account of the phrases I have italicised. Metaphor *being not too explicit, rouses the faculties to act.* This is the source of its power in literature, and the important general point to take away from this discussion.

4.0 Finally, two kinds of metaphor that fail.

4.1 (a) DEAD METAPHORS

A dead metaphor is the name for an expression whose metaphorical effect is no longer felt. For example: a table leg, wool-gathering, he flew to the station. Language is full of dead metaphors because metaphor is a source of linguistic creation.

4.1 (b) More to our purpose, there is the 'dying' or 'nearly-dead' metaphor. H. W. Fowler quotes an example:

> But dead metaphors will not lie quietly down together if there was any repugnance between them in life: e'en in their ashes live their wonted fires, and they get up and fight . . .
>
> *It is impossible to crush the Government's aim to restore the means of living and working freely.*

Which are the 'dead metaphors' in the italicised sentence? Ring them before going any further.

Fowler goes on:

> *Crush* for baffle, *aim* for purpose are both dead metaphors as long as they are kept apart, but the juxtaposition forces on us the thought that you cannot crush an aim.

The moribund energies of a dead metaphor can, however, be used creatively. The novelist E. M. Forster (1879–1970) writes of a character who is worrying about her two nieces.

> . . . in social matters, their aunt had accomplished nothing. Sooner or later the girls would enter on the process known as throwing themselves away, and if they had delayed hitherto, it was only that they might throw themselves more vehemently in the future.
>
> *Howard's End*, Chap. 3

For a girl to 'throw herself away' is a nearly-dead metaphor for an unsuitable marriage: to throw oneself away *vehemently* revives its literal meaning with comic effect. And this makes us think critically of the conventional way the aunt views marriage.

4.2 MIXED METAPHORS

Fowler's objection to the mixture of 'crush' with 'aim' is that the literal applications of each term are incompatible. *Crush* evokes a physical action which cannot be reconciled with the physical action evoked by taking *aim*. This objection is often urged against so-called mixed metaphors. I expect you've heard of the legendary speaker in the Houses of Parliament trying to persuade the Members that he had discovered a conspiracy.

> I smell a rat. I see him floating in the air and darkening the sky, but I shall nip him in the bud.

Singly each comparison may work: together they destroy each other. Coleridge quotes a real example:

> No more will I endure love's pleasing pain,
> Nor round my heart's leg tie his galling chain.

You can locate love's pains in the heart, and you can compare them to having a chain round your leg. But a heart with a leg involves an absurd mixture of metaphors. Why? Think about this in relation to the analysis of how a metaphor works in 1.3.

A metaphor implies a comparison, and a comparison involves an act of selection which 'makes sense' of the comparison by deciding on what qualities of the object introduced by the 'transferred' term are relevant. In this case, the heart is being implicitly compared to *something with a human leg*. What attributes of this 'something' are we to seize upon? All the poet offers is the leg itself – its muscularity? its anatomical structure? the foot at the end of it? None of these make sense. We might want to say further that there is *no* relevant aspect. But this we cannot be sure of. Another poet may in another poem successfully manage this same metaphor. The point is that this poet has failed.

5.0 Now it is useful to recognise that some metaphors fail, but the reason is not simply because they are 'mixed'. Metaphors of any complexity are always 'mixed', but successful ones are so managed by the poet that the different acts of selection involved in understanding them do not clash. Here is an inherently mixed metaphor from a famous passage in *Macbeth*:

> Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.
>
> Act V, scene v, ll. 24–8

There are three comparisons for 'Life'. What are they? Do they create the kind of difficulty illustrated in 4.2?

They are: (a) a walking shadow; (b) a poor player; (c) a tale told by an idiot. How does Shakespeare avoid the potential tangle? The transition between (a) and (c) which threatens most trouble is eased by the intervention of (b). The transition between (a) and (b) seems to work like this: 'walking' prepares us for the idea of an actor strutting about the stage, while the actor's exit after the play ('heard no more') reminds us that his life on the stage is unreal, like a 'shadow'. The transition from (b) to (c) depends on the implication that a play tells a story, which prepares us for 'tale'; 'idiot' develops the idea implanted in 'struts and frets' – pointless action and feeling; 'sound and fury' takes up the same point, and 'signifying nothing' makes explicit the meaninglessness of the poor player's 'shadowy' life. So, a pattern of association of ideas and feelings set going by the subordinate parts of each metaphor, mitigates any possible clashes between the main terms. We can put this another way by saying that Shakespeare guides our minds to make the right acts of selection and interpretation as we move through the passage. In what way *is* life like a walking shadow? In the sense that a poor actor's life is a kind of illusion . . . and so on.

5.1 *The difference between a mixed metaphor that works, and one that fails, is that the writer has succeeded in exerting an imaginative control over the implicit comparisons.* We must not think of this control as an *intellectual* act – though it may be this for you and me who want to trace its effects. It rather resembles the intimate attunement between a concert pianist and his piano, the sensitive control which his fingers and arms, without *wholly conscious* thought, can exert over the keys – the medium through which he is communicating. The writer's feeling for language has the same kind of completeness and intimate inner knowledge. His control of the associative powers of metaphor are part of that knowledge.

6.0 Poets exert different degrees of control over the working of metaphorical writing. Broadly speaking, in the modern period, they have moved towards giving the reader a good deal of imaginative freedom. They often achieve this by hiding one term of the metaphor – the real situation to which the metaphorical expression has been transferred. It is as if, instead of saying 'He was a lion in the fight', the poet simply said 'Lion in the fight', and left the reader to work out the point of saying so. Some of the difficulty of modern poetry derives from this. But so does some of its power. If the value of metaphor to writers is their capacity for *engaging the reader's active participation in the verbal structure*, then metaphors whose application is initially mysterious, because deliberately withheld, draw the reader into the situation more fully than the more explicit kind. Here is a short poem metaphorical in the modern way, in giving only hints about the real situation to which it applies.

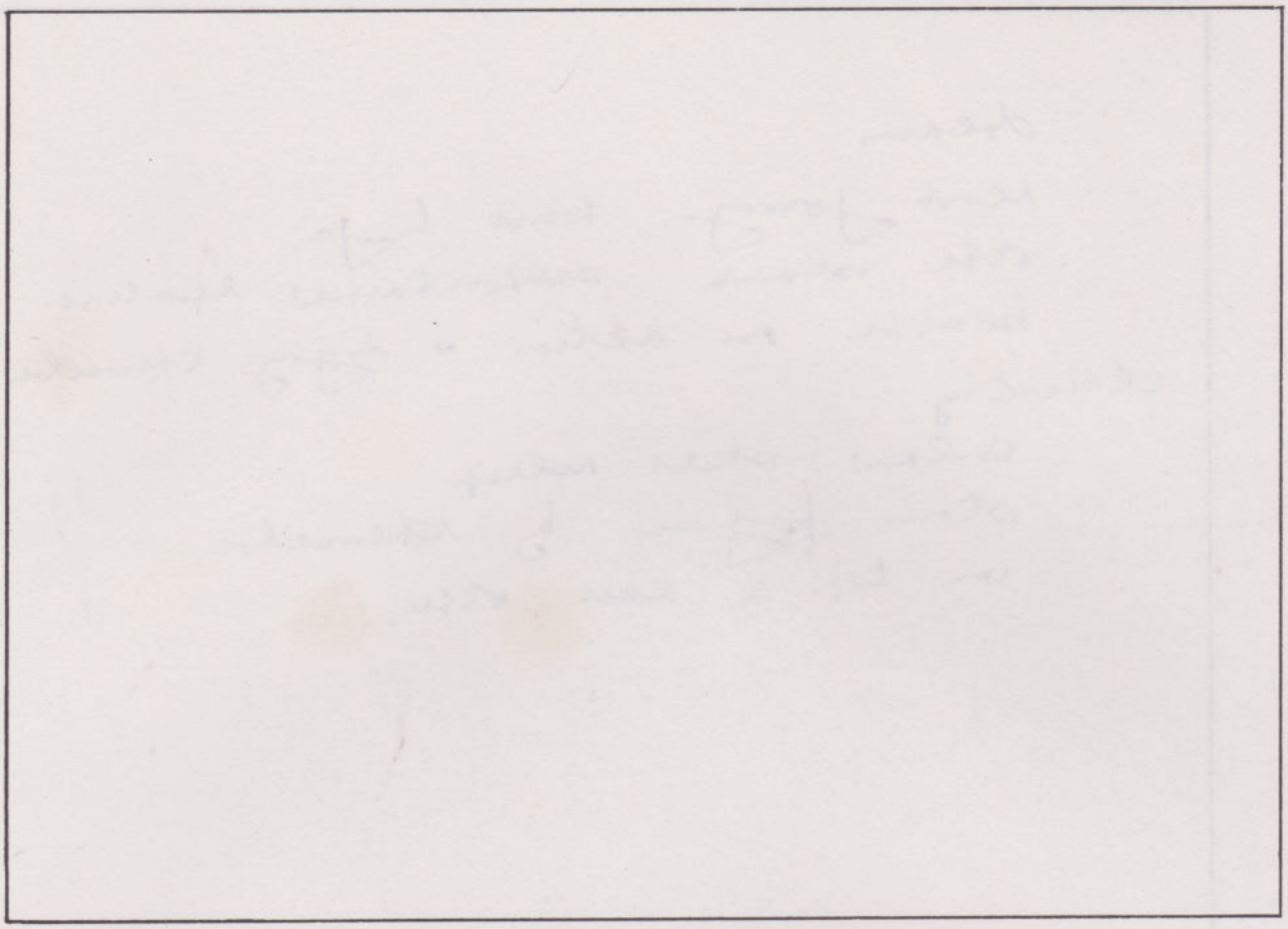
> On nights like this, the heart journeys to other islands.
> Beaches rise and dance naked under moonlight.
> Inland, asleep, you see
> The stone faces of your solitude being piled slowly.
>
> St. Geraud (1940–).

What do you think this poem is about? Take it line by line, asking yourself what sort of human experience could be reasonably expressed in each metaphorical phrase.

DISCUSSION

(a) The poem presents a scene. It has two parts: islands, beaches, moonlight, and (by implication) water; and an inland scene, whose only detail is itself a metaphor involving stones, perhaps statues, and a piling up process. How do we know that this *is* a metaphorical scene, a landscape of the mind or feelings? If somebody was to mistake it for a *description*, what phrases would you point to? Underline them before going any further. The first sentence is metaphorical ('the heart journeys') and the second shows the scene itself behaving metaphorically: no beaches could literally rise and dance.

(b) But what is it about? The only clue lies in the first four words. 'On nights like this . . . various things happen which may be compared to . . . the events mentioned in the poem.' Basically, there are two events: the heart journeys through the island scene, while 'inland' solitude is being increased. Can you see any connection between these? Think about this before going any further.



(c) It is this connection that leads me to believe that the poem is about an estrangement between lovers. Journeys of the heart seem most simply understood as a search for emotional excitement, and the detail of the beaches dancing naked has an erotic quality. Then while this is happening 'solitude' is increasing. 'You' could be the poet himself, or it could be the reader, making the poem an implicit appeal to a shared experience, or it could simply be 'you' in the sense of anybody. Notice how 'stone faces' – bleak, unyielding faces, or the petrified faces of statues – contrasts with the activity and freedom of the opening scene. Solitude is seen as 'stone faces', and then the metaphor glides into the different one of stones being piled up. (A *mixed* metaphor, but the details never become so definite as to clash.)

6.1 I find this a powerful little poem, and I think the source of its power lies in the degree to which, in order to grasp what it says, the reader has to enter imaginatively into the situations evoked by the metaphorical details. There is an underlying control over these details (otherwise we could make no over-all sense of them). But much is left open: each scene tails off into mystery. There seem to be residual meanings, springs of feeling that we cannot quite locate. This sense in which some of the poem's meaning is out of reach is not uncommon in powerfully metaphorical writing.

7.0 The main point to be learned from this section is the way metaphorical writing contributes to poetry and – though we have not had room for more than one example – to fictional prose. Its appeal to direct experience, its imaginative challenge, its ability to communicate ideas and feelings simultaneously (very much as we experience them) make it the ideal method for engaging the reader's interest, and drawing him into the experiences being recounted.

TONE

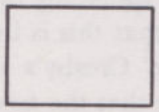
1.0 All the points of language discussed so far have been illustrated by quoting actual groupings of words, rather in the way a biologist might point to different parts of an animal or a plant in the course of explaining its over-all structure. But in interpreting the meaning of these verbal details, we have had to introduce the idea of the feeling aroused by the poem. This, more generally, is the subject of our last section, and I propose to call it *Tone*.

1.1 Let me try and define Tone from ordinary experience. You are on your way to work, and you meet in succession two people. You are on friendly terms with the first, but the second shows signs of refusing responsibility for damage he caused to your car. You have not broken off communications, but your feelings are the opposite of genial. The only words you have time to speak are: 'Good Morning'. Could you nevertheless convey to the first a feeling of general amiability, and to the second some of your accumulating resentment?

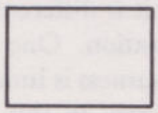
1.2 Surely without the slightest difficulty – because the *tone* in which you would pronounce the words 'Good Morning' would be amiable for the first man, and chilly for the second. Exactly *how* you would alter the tone would be a personal matter, but it would probably mean changes in the pitch of your voice, and in the kind and timing of emphasis. (E.g. with greetings, usage suggests that a rising pitch is friendlier than a dead-level one.) The practical details are not our concern here, but the general point is that in human communication, tone of utterance is a sensitive and delicate indication of feeling, of attitude. Again and again, what we respond to in voices is tone, as if it alone contained the real meaning which the actual words disguised. (E.g. 'It wasn't what he said, so much as the tone in which he said it that worried me'; or, 'How dare you take that tone to me?') We have seen that some aspects of language affect us because of their connection with our first responses to language. This is also true of tone. Children learn to use words not only within the powerful emotional context of their feelings about their parents, but actually *from* the parental tone of voice: encouraging, soothing, threatening, as the occasion demands. Our adult response to tone as an indicator of feeling and attitude is firmly grounded in experience.

1.3 The existence of tone as an instrument of communication is easy to recognise. It is not so easy to describe. Read the following passages and describe in one or two words the tone in which each speaker might reasonably be expected to speak.

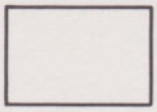
(a) Tonight the Prime Minister, Major Chichester-Clark, said on television: 'I advise everyone to look to the security of his own premises. Fire raisers have been at work and explosions have occurred and precautions should be taken.'



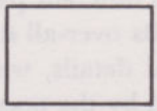
(b) [Aircraft] wreckage was scattered over a wide pine grove. 'The scene was terrible,' said Ramon. 'We tried desperately to find some survivors but everyone was dead. The whole area was silent.'



(c) 'I was called Muscles by some of the older fellows when I first started playing tennis. They called me Muscles because I didn't have any. You can imagine how much of a body beautiful I was as a schoolboy.'



(d) 'Just the other day I was watching two bees rolling around inside a poppy in my garden, wallowing in pure opium, stoned out of their skulls. Honestly, they couldn't fly a straight line. Can we really entrust the making of honey to anything as irresponsible as a bee? Spreading opium addiction among little children?'



DISCUSSION

(a), (b). The subject matter makes clear that each speaker would use a basically serious tone, but there would be differences.

(a) reports the words of someone in political authority making a public pronouncement. It would need gravity. It might even be slightly menacing to frighten people into an appreciation of the situation.

(b) would also be grave, but for a different reason – to convey sadness, and perhaps a sense of the uselessness of words in the face of catastrophe. The different tones then would reflect the different situations.

(c), (d). These may have caused more uncertainty, because the situations in which the words were uttered are not revealed.

(c) If the tone was serious, we have to think of a situation in which the words could be uttered, and that must mean an adult remembering a painful incident from his childhood. Does this seem probable to you? Think about it again, regardless of the tone you decided on.

The difficulty is that for an adult seriously complaining about his childhood, 'They called me Muscles because I didn't have any' – a schoolboy's gibe – doesn't seem grounds enough for complaint. Which leaves only one alternative, that the tone is humorous. And this, in fact, is what it was: the Australian tennis player, Ken Rosewall, replying to a journalist's questions after playing at Wimbledon. If you had known that, there would never have been any doubt about the tone. So, again, the tone relates closely to the situation which gives rise to the words.

(d) Again, we don't know who speaks the words, or why, but there are details of phrasing that make it hard to imagine them belonging to a serious situation. ('bees stoned out of their skulls . . . spreading opium addiction.') It is not too difficult to conclude that this is intentionally humorous writing. (It comes from John Crosby's column in *The Observer*, 5 July 1970.) But notice that the *tone*, though not the situation, *is* serious. The seriousness is the kind used in dead-pan humour, and we only know that it is different from the seriousness of (a) by referring to the situation. One other point is worth adding. Crosby's mock-seriousness is imitated from the tone appropriate to urgent social concern, in this case about drug addiction. There is an

edge to his words, and one could imagine this as satire on *bogus* moral indignation about social problems. (G. B. Shaw uses the same tone for satiric purposes in his plays.) So, with (d) we are beginning to move away from the *existence* of tone in actual speech to *its deliberate exploitation by writers* for certain complications of meaning.

1.4 The general point I want you to take away from this discussion is that tone is a constant feature of human speech. What it communicates is feeling, and by extension, the attitudes towards people and issues that are tied up with feeling. If this is something you haven't consciously recognised before, start listening to the tone of your own voice as it adjusts to different human situations, and to your own reactions to the tone in other people's voices.

2.0 Tone is important in literature because it is an essential part of meaning, in precisely the way that it is a part of meaning in ordinary speech. To recognise it, we need to bring to bear the kind of sensitivities we use in everyday situations for 'reading' the subtler less explicit parts of verbal communication. The key word here is *recognition*. In the examples that follow, I will be asking you to *describe* the tone, but beyond a certain point this is not particularly fruitful because it means summarising in a few words the effect of a whole variety of meaningful indicators – pitch, stress, pause, timing, and so forth. It is always worth *trying* to describe tone, but mainly as a way of learning to recognise it. What really matters is that you should develop your powers of attention. Moreover, tone in most poems is rarely simple or constant (or if it is, such a poem presents no problems for discussion here). Subtlety, fluidity, apparent contradictions of tone are very common in poetry because interesting human situations usually involve subtlety and complexity of feeling. Our language for the feelings is in this respect misleading. We speak of anger, fear, shame, love, disgust, as if there were an actual state of feeling corresponding to each term. But not only does each word cover a considerable range of actual feelings, it is very unusual to have one feeling at a time. Feelings are usually on the move, shifting, qualifying, approved or inhibited by thought, moving us towards or away from action, part of the elaborate and many-levelled process of response to the world that we call consciousness. In that sense, literature is a more authentic record of experience than the rough-and-ready language of the feelings which does for everyday use. This is not the least of the reasons for studying it. In recognising tone, then, we are coming to grips with something central to the nature of literature.

2.1 There are two broad categories into which we can divide the tone of poems: the sympathetic, and the critical.

By *sympathetic* tone, I mean a tone which indicates that the poet broadly approves of the situation or state of affairs the poem expresses. By *critical* tone, I mean that the poet is mainly concerned to convey a critical point of view about the situation or state of affairs the poem expresses. Both tones cover a very wide range of possibilities. Sympathetic tone can range from tepid near-neutrality to the most impassioned approval, and critical tone can mean anything from mildly-humorous detachment to sustained antipathy. And many poems involve both tones, in varying degrees. But the basic distinction is worth making because if we fail to notice whether the tone

is *primarily* sympathetic or critical we will probably misread the poem as badly as we would misread a real conversation in which, say, a serious tone was ironic (as in extract (d) para. 1.3). Here are examples, both extracts from longer poems. Classify the tone of each. (Both poems are by men.)

(a) Let me take this other glove off
As the *vox humana* swells,
And the beauteous fields of Eden
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.
Here, where England's statesmen lie,
Listen to a lady's cry.

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans,
Spare their women for Thy sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy Mistake.
But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,
Don't let anyone bomb me.

(b) God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,
Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine –
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

The tumult and the shouting dies;
The Captains and the Kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

DISCUSSION

(a) Lacking the whole poem, you need to know that the author is a man, to avoid identifying him with the speaker of the verses. That is to say, the poem is a dramatic utterance by a character invented by the poet. (Compare Cowper's *Pity for Poor Africans*, RHYTHM 7.3.) The lady believes what she says, but the poet makes it clear enough that he does not. This tone is *critical* then. If you got this right, what details would you point to in order to persuade someone who disagreed? Think again if you didn't, and make a note of significant points.

The tone here is mainly established by the broad contrast between what the lady says and what, given the situation, we feel she ought to be saying. Two outstanding points are: pardoning God for *His* mistakes instead of asking pardon for her own; and directly asking him to bomb the Germans. There are other comic details: the glove-removing, fields *basking* beneath *bells* (metaphorical failure), the rhythmic emphasis on 'lady', the frankly self-interested conclusion. Finally, there is the hymn-like formal pattern created by rhythm and rhyme, which contributes so much to the necessary atmosphere.

I would sum up the tone here as veering between unqualified hostility and scornful humour, a usual range in satirical writing.

(b) The tone is in the sympathetic category. How has it been established?

I would point to the solemn rhythms, the refrain, the traditional invocations, words like 'awful', 'tumult', 'ancient' used in full seriousness.

2.2 You may have recognised (b) as Kipling's *Recessional, 1897*. (a) is *In Westminster Abbey*, by John Betjeman.

3.0 Here is a more elusive case.

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps.

Read the poem two or three times. It will be useful, first, to take it in parts. Decide whether the tone of each part is predominantly critical or sympathetic:

CRITICAL SYMPATHETIC

(a) The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.

(b) Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

(c) And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;

(d) The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,

(e) And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.

(f) And then the lighting of the lamps.

The over-all balance of feeling will not always be easy to decide. Take your time over each part, letting the details have their effect. Enter into the situation created by the poet, and avoid superimposing one of your own. Write your final conclusion here.

DISCUSSION

(i) To take the straightforward ones first, I would say that (c) and (d) are mainly critical. In (c) the adjectives communicate distaste, as does the scene of old newspapers blowing about. I am less certain about (d): is the scene pitiful, or sordid? On balance, the second, but something 'broken' has an air of pathos. (e) and (f) seem straighforwardly sympathetic, the horse is lonely, and the lighting of the lamps is certainly not unattractive.

(ii) But (a) and (b) are more tricky. How do you react to 'smell of steaks in passageways'? It depends for me on how fresh the smell is. It might be a steak cooking for somebody coming home at the end of the day, but it also might be lingering smells of yesterday's – or last month's – food. So there is an attractive *and* a repellent effect. And 'passageways': the sense of enclosure is not welcoming like, for example, a glimpse of the kitchen where the steaks *might* be cooking. (b) too is ambiguous. (You will recall the discussion of its second line in SYNTAX 7.0.) Weariness and exhaustion are dominant, and the sense of pointless routine ('days'). But is it a weariness that the poet invites sympathy for, or is he observing it critically, with distaste? I find it hard to know.

In sum, then, two sections are mainly sympathetic, two mainly critical, and two contain elements of both.

(iii) Now, there was something a bit artificial about that exercise. It is a useful thing to ponder the effect of individual details in a compact poem, but ultimately they cannot be judged in

isolation from each other. The complete effect of (a) and (b) is not the same as each separately, or as when joined to (c) and (d). The slight sense of revulsion present in (a) is reinforced by the scene in (c), and the uncertain tone of sympathy in (b) is affected by the conclusion in (e) and (f). But, on balance, I hope we can agree that the tone is mixed, that the poet's attitude towards the scene is neither simply critical, nor simply sympathetic, as the verses by Betjeman and Kipling were. Of course, you may feel that the final lines put the poem in the sympathetic category. The lonely horse seems to sum up the suggestions in earlier details of the observer's exclusion from human activity. And the final rhyme has a clinching effect, which the subtle irregularity of other rhymes helps to emphasise. But the elements of revulsion remains.

3.1 The author is T. S. Eliot. You read his comments on the 'auditory imagination' under RHYTHM (1.2). It is the first part of a poem called *Preludes*, which you will find in his *Collected Poems*.

4.0 Here is a poem whose tone is subtle in a different way:

THE SELF-UNSEEING

Here is the ancient floor,
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet walked in.

She sat here in her chair,
Smiling into the fire;
He who played stood there,
Bowing it higher and higher.

Childlike, I danced in a dream;
Blessings emblazoned that day;
Everything glowed with a gleam;
Yet we were looking away!

'She' and 'he' are the speaker's parents; 'bowing' means playing the violin.

Decide which main category of tone the poem belongs to before going any further.

Underline CRITICAL or SYMPATHETIC.

4.1 The poem recalls a past incident, felt to be of great value, so the tone is sympathetic. But is it dominantly sad, or joyful? An elegy for the dead, or a celebratory act of memory? Try to describe the speaker's tone about or feeling for the incident described. Here are some points to concentrate on before you reach your decision.

(i) What is the effect of the adjectives in line 2?
(ii) What situation is implied in line 3?
(iii) Why does the poet say 'the dead feet *walked* in'?
(iv) Contrast the dominant feeling of verses one and two.
(v) What is the effect of line 8?
(vi) What is the predominant feeling emerging from lines 9–11?
(vii) What difference to this feeling does line 12 make?
(viii) What bearing has the title on the poem?

Having thought about these points, is the tone joyful, sad, celebratory, elegiac, etc.? Describe it in three or four words.

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

(iv)

(v)

(vi)

(vii)

(viii)

DISCUSSION

(a) The details referred to in (i), (ii) and (iii) underline that the incident took place long ago (the floor remains, not the door), but also evoke the physical presence of the dead in 'footworn', and in line 4.

(b) Verse one is sad, and verse two is .....?
The word is not easy to find, but there is a definite contrast. Line 8 emphasises the player's active energy as he plays more vigorously, in contrast to the mother's stillness.

(c) The predominant feeling of lines 9–11 is given in 'blessings emblazoned', 'glowed', 'gleam'. But note the qualifying 'dream'. This is the child's absorption in his dance, but it reminds us that the scene is being evoked in memory.

(d) This last line adds a feeling that is not simply regret for the vanished past. It seems to me responsible for the final elusiveness of tone, the difficulty in deciding whether the poem is primarily elegiac, or primarily celebratory. The connection with the title seems to be with this last line.

(e) Let us take the last line in its simplest meaning. They were looking away *from each other*: she into the fire, he presumably at his fingers on the violin, or up in the air, and the speaker totally self-absorbed. Despite the family occasion, these details show each figure *isolated from the others*. So, the last line underlines this. But the effect goes further. '*Yet* we were looking away!' What else might they all have been looking away from, apart from each other? The 'yet' suggests that this was a surprising thing to have done, that they ought to have known better. Were the 'blessings' of the moment so rare that they deserved immediate recognition? There is even the feeling that if they had not been looking away, the moment might have been perpetuated. You may think this too explicit, that the line's power resides in shades of suggestion best left wordless. But we can, I hope, agree that it introduces into the remembered experience an extraordinary poignancy, different in kind from the more familiar elegiac note of the first verse.

(f) Finally, the answer to the question: 'Is the predominant feeling sad or joyful?' is, I think, that neither feeling predominates, that the one feeling balances the other.

4.2 The tone, then, is complex in another way than Eliot's poem. Its author is Thomas Hardy and if you find this particular kind of

poem interests you, a more substantial one worth looking up is *The Going*. You will find it in his *Collected Poems*.

5.0 In illustrating tone, we have at last been looking at complete poems, instead of, as so many of our examples have been, extracts. We have, in fact, moved to a point where you should now be able to identify more confidently the sort of questions to ask yourself in reading poetry and, to some extent, the prose often used by novelists. It seems therefore a good idea to conclude by looking at two poems which you have already met in *The Artist and Society* (Unit 4), and to recapitulate the various main points about language in literature which we have been discussing separately. The major question about these poems will concern their respective tones, but we will look explicitly at other points to identify what contribution they make to the whole effect. If there were parts of the unit which you have found more difficult than others, this would be the moment to go over them again.

6.0

Forget not yet the tried intent
Of such a truth as I have meant:
My great travail so gladly spent,
Forget not yet.

Forget not yet when first began
The weary life you know, since whan
The suit, the service none tell can.
Forget not yet.

Forget not yet the great assays,[1]
The cruel wrong, the scornful ways,
The painful patience in denays,[2]
Forget not yet.

Forget not yet, forget not this,
How long ago hath been, and is,
The mind that never meant amiss.
Forget not yet.

Forget not then thine own approved,
The which so long hath thee so loved,
Whose steadfast faith yet never moved:
Forget not this.

Sir Thomas Wyatt

1 'assays' means 'efforts'. 2 'denays' means denials.

6.1 Here are some points of detail to consider:

(a) The key phrase in the poem is 'Forget not yet'. Examine the first verse. How does the alliteration help to keep the phrase in the reader's consciousness?

(b) How does the rhythmic pattern of each verse help to keep the 'forget not' phrase in mind?

(c) The last two verses vary the opening line used in the first three. With what effect?

(d) What two points of syntax strike you as relevant?

(e) What is the main source of its strength of feeling?

6.2 **DISCUSSION**

(a) The alliteration stresses 't', 'tr', 'gr', 'g': all main consonants in the key phrase. The 'tr' effect also links 'tried', 'truth' and 'travail', the main ideas which the poet is appealing to.

(b) The 'forget not yet' phrase has two stresses ('get', 'yet') supported by an internal rhyme. Most of the lines fall into two equal parts with two stresses apiece which gives the same rhythmic pattern as the key phrase.

(c) In the fourth verse, the change to 'forget not this' shifts attention to the most important point of all. Wyatt concentrates on 'the mind', the source of all his loyalty and steadfastness. In the last verse, 'forget not then' is more an appeal than an accusation, and this too is suitable, since for the first time Wyatt mentions, not his rights as a faithful servant of the code, but his love.

(d) The important points are the reiteration of the imperative form at the beginning and end of each verse; and the inclusion of everything else within the two 'forget' phrases.

(e) I think the main source of feeling is rhythmic. The pattern gives the reader the insistence, the steadiness, the self-control. These qualities authenticate both his claim to having served her well, and his moral right to claim his reward. The rhythm also conveys the sense of an imposed restraint, which links directly with the human situation.

6.3 Finally, what of the tone? Is it consistent throughout, or do you notice variations or complexities? What final attitude does this tone convey about the person addressed, and by extension, about the values that dominate the relationship?

Fig. 10 William Blake

Clearly, there is a good deal to be said on this score, but the main points for me would be the striking combination of threat ('You'd better not forget!') and appeal ('Please don't forget!'). It remains just within the code which restricts the suitor to pleading but the feeling is on the edge of angry accusation. The last two verses soften the effect of accumulating resentment which the first three have built up. The tight rhythmic pattern seems to hold within its structure feelings that would challenge the terms of the relationship if they ever got out. The poem is an excellent example of how rough-and-ready is our language for the feelings. Nominally, it is a 'love poem', yet its actual feeling seems close to anger.

6.4 Now re-read the relevant paragraphs in Unit 4 about what the poem reveals of the society which contributed to the experiences it conveys, and consider the above discussion in that light.

7.0 The second poem for discussion is Blake's *London*.

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

7.1 Here again are some points of detail to examine:

(a) The rhythm of the poem is emphatic. What contribution does it make to the total effect? Try to describe the mood it creates, and then relate this to the theme.

(b) Each verse shows striking patterns of internal rhyme and alliteration. What can be said about their function?

(c) What is the outstanding point about the syntax in the first two verses, and what does it contribute to the whole?

(d) The poem has several complex metaphorical expressions: 'the mind-forg'd manacles', 'sigh/runs in blood', 'blasts the . . . tear', 'blights . . . Marriage hearse'. Consider their meaning and role in their respective verses. Do you notice any common function which each in its different way fulfils? Think carefully about Blake's major theme in this poem – if necessary go back to the discussion of the lines from verse three in Syntax 8.0.

DISCUSSION

7.2 (a) The main effect derives from the sustained emphasis, the steady four stresses per line which never relaxes, and yet is never monotonous (slight variations from line to line prevent this). This creates a tone of grave seriousness, which intensifies as the poem develops. The pace is kept slow by the clumps of consonants in phrases like 'mind-forg'd manacles', 'black'ning Church', 'hapless Soldier', and lines with several monosyllabic words (e.g. lines 12, 13, 14, 15). It is, of course, hard to distinguish rhythmic effect here from the effect of words like 'woe' and 'weakness' which set the emotional tone early. But Blake has made it impossible to read the poem fast or to escape the repeated stresses on key words. In this sense, the rhythmic pattern makes its own contribution.

(b) The function of the alliteration and internal rhyme in each verse is *to link together key words*. In verse one, 'charter'd'/'mark' is the outstanding case, but 'wander'/'weakness'/'woe' is worth noting; also the word 'every', which functions prominently in the next verse, is linked with 'mark', and so carries that echo forward. In verse two, 'every'/'cry'/'fear', and 'ban'/'mind-'/'manacles'. The 'm' sound here picks up 'mark' from the previous verse. In verse three 'Chimney'/'Church' and 'hapless'/'palace' underline the victim/social institution link; 'appals'/'palace', 'black'ning'/'blood' link the two institutions, while 'cry' and 'every' pick up main sounds from the previous verse. In verse four, the same cross-linking exists in 'hear'/'harlot'/'hearse', and 'blasts'/'blights'/'plagues' (a pattern which echoes 'black'ning'/'blood' from verse three). These patterns of sound-echo within the poem help to maintain the deliberate concentrated rhythm, the effect of no relaxation or lightening of tone. (Contrast the Wyatt poem on this point.)

(c) The outstanding point is the repetition of 'mark' and 'every' as if in exhaustive analysis of all relevant aspects of the problem.

(d) The metaphorical expressions relate to the poem's main theme, the connection between the individuals and the social system: partly they are its victims, but their weakness and self-imprisonment makes the society capable of tyrannising as it does. The soldier is the victim of the palace he fights for, and the interaction of prostitution and sexually-stultifying marriages (the most complex of the individual/society links) destroys the newborn child, and the hope of the future by infecting it with venereal disease.

7.3 What general tone would you ascribe to the poem? Are there significant variations or developments? How does Blake's tone principally differ from Wyatt's?

DISCUSSION

(a) I think the tone alters in two main ways. The proportions of compassion and anger vary, and while at first the observer ('I') establishes the tone, the three victims of the system – chimney-sweeper, soldier, and harlot – take over this role. This leads to an *impersonality* of tone in sharp contrast with Wyatt's, but appropriate to the poem's subject.

(b) The speaker is both an observer who *wanders*, and an accuser who *marks*. He reports a situation, but he also analyses and judges it. As we move from the observer to the accuser, the tone stiffens into the pointed scrutiny of 'marks of weakness, marks of woe'. This critical mood culminates in 'mind-forg'd manacles' of the next verse, but meanwhile the accuser's tone has been affected by his observation of the crying infants and of men's 'fear'. This more compassionate response enters into line 8: people do imprison themselves, but as prisoners they demand sympathy. In the next verse, compassion dominates the observer's attitude towards the victims, and his criticism focusses on the social institutions of church and palace. In verse four, the speaker has returned to his observer's role. The note of compassion is maintained in the reference to the infant's cry, and of accusation in the phrase *marriage-hearse*, but the main feeling emanates from the curse of the harlot, and the plagues with which she revenges her victimisation on the institutions that both use and condemn her.

(c) This transition from the speaker's judgements to those of the victims against the institutions that they, in part, sustain, accounts for the impersonal tone of the whole poem. Blake's feeling is not on behalf of his own condition, as was Wyatt's,

but about the social structure as he sees it. He is sufficiently outside it to make penetrating weighty analyses. And this is important. We must not feel that he is grinding some personal axe, projecting his own personal problems back on to society. Blake achieves this by referring to groups and classes of people rather than individuals; and to social institutions – religious, political, and domestic/sexual – rather than to specific occasions of injustice, and by having his most serious indictments emerge, not from him, but from the situation itself. This gives the poem its weighty generality. Related to it is the complex analysis contained within the metaphors. Blake neither blames the institutions simply, nor does he see those whom they tyrannise over simply as victims. He maintains an authentically complex recognition of the relationships between individuals in a society, and the social framework that determines the quality of their lives.

CONCLUSION

The important points covered in this unit have been summarised at the end of each section. Here I would like to make a more general point.

What I have outlined is a methodical but flexible way of coming to terms with individual poems. No method is foolproof, but a formal exploration of a poem's language is a valuable guard against both superficial dismissal and superficial acceptance. What a formal approach cannot *ensure* is full understanding of a poem, because this also depends on individual qualities (beyond the reach of correspondence stimulus) – the willingness to enter into unfamiliar states of feeling; a degree of self-awareness; interest in understanding one's experience more fully. Literature is not about itself, but about the communication of the texture and the value of human experience. So, a formal approach to poetic language cannot be an end, but only a method to be used for grasping what poems have to communicate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made for material used from the following sources:

TEXT

Edward Arnold Ltd., *Howard's End*, E. M. Forster; Jonathan Cape Ltd., *Collected Poems*, A. E. Housman; Chatto and Windus Ltd., *Poems*, Wilfred Owen; J. M. Dent and Sons, *Coleridge's Poems*, ed. John Beer, *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Gerald Bullett, *Collected Poems*, Dylan Thomas; Gerald Duckworth and Co., *Complete Verse*, Hilaire Belloc; Faber and Faber Ltd., *The Faber Book of Comic Verse*, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, T. S. Eliot; Longmans Ltd., *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation*, F. W. Bateson; Macmillan & Co. Ltd., *Collected Poems*, Thomas Hardy, *An Introduction to Poetry*, ed. Louis Simpson, *Collected Poems*, W. B. Yeats; Methuen & Co. Ltd., *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir; John Murray, Ltd., *Collected Poems*, John Betjeman; *The Observer*, dated 5 July 1970; Oxford University Press, *Biographia Literaria*, S. T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, William Cowper, *The Poems*, John Dryden, *Modern English Usage*, H. W. Fowler, *Blake: The Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, *The Lore and Language of School Children*, Iona and Peter Opie, *The Poetical Works of John Milton*; Penguin Books Ltd., *The Rainbow*, D. H. Lawrence, *The Metaphysical Poets*, Helen Gardner, *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse*, ed. George Macbeth; The Sixties Press, *The Sea and the Honeycomb*, ed. Robert Bly.

ILLUSTRATIONS

The Mansell Collection, Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

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FURTHER READING

This correspondence material is the whole of your reading for Unit 9. But if, at some future stage, you want to pursue the subject further, here are some reading suggestions:

Louis Simpson (ed.), *An Introduction to Poetry*, Macmillan, 1968.

A choice of English and American poetry from Chaucer to the present day by a contemporary American poet. The introductory essay is particularly good, and the glossary of technical terms should be useful both for beginners and for general reference.

John Press (ed.), *A Map of Modern English Verse*, Oxford University Press, 1969.

An anthology concentrating on the poetry of the last sixty years. The introductory material both for single authors and for general background is especially valuable.

James Reeves, *Understanding Poetry*, Pan Books, 1965.

A sensitive and agreeable survey with a wide variety of examples which beginners should find helpful.

H. Coombes, *Literature and Criticism*, Penguin, 1963.

An introduction to the problem of critical judgement.

F. W. Bateson, *English Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, Longmans, 1950.

An original and stimulating discussion on historical lines of the changing idiom of English poetry.

INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE (PART II)

Prepared by Arnold Kettle for the Arts Foundation Course Team

PROSE AND POETRY

1.0 In this unit we are going to discuss two stories.[1] Both are written in prose and indeed when we speak of a story we generally assume that it is in prose. I do not propose in this unit to offer you a firm definition of the difference between prose and poetry, for the subject is more complicated than is sometimes thought and I doubt whether the sort of definition I would come out with would be much use. So I shall merely suggest some of the problems involved in arriving at a satisfactory distinction and ask you to bear the whole question in mind as you study the material we shall be dealing with.

1.1 Meanwhile, a few of the more central problems.

1.1 (a) Contrary to the assumptions of most people who have not thought much about the distinction, poetry, as a form of art, is older than prose. (See Unit 3, para. 5.2.2.) All primitive societies seem to have produced some form of poetry, but prose arrives on the scene later and it is arguable that prose, in any usefully definable sense, cannot come into being before writing.

1.1 (b) This last point shows how hard it is to draw any absolute distinction between poetry and prose. Primitive societies had something we can recognise as poetry (see Unit 3, para. 5.2 ff., and Unit 4, para. 3.1 ff.): they also had stories which were presumably related somewhat differently from songs. But whether the method of telling these stories (what were to become folk-tales, fables, etc.) approximated more to what we think of as poetry or prose it is impossible to say. By the time they were written down they had a form which we can recognise as closer to the one or the other. But the more you think about the question the more you may wonder whether the distinction makes much sense.

1.1 (c) The distinction is not one between writing that is like ordinary speech (prose) and writing arranged in a different, less 'natural' way (poetry). If Molière's Monsieur Jourdain spoke prose (see Unit 3, para. 5.2.2) this was because he is a character in a play and Molière *wrote* prose. If we speak prose (which we do sometimes, but by no means always) it is because we have got into the habit of trying to do so rather than because it is more 'natural'.

1.2 Let us, then, avoid searching for an ultimate definition and simply say:

1.2 (a) While poetry seems to have developed from the relatively spontaneous sounds and phrases uttered by people in the course of their activities, prose involves a more self-conscious and organised use of language. The basic unit of prose is the sentence and a sentence is a construction of language which has at least a beginning and an end and tends to have some sort of formal shape (e.g. subject-verb-object). Without going into this in any sort of detail, the point I want to emphasise is that even the simplest prose involves a self-conscious organisation of language that presupposes a relatively sophisticated level of human development. To be able to describe things (or

1 The Book of *Ruth* from the Authorised Version of the Bible and *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, translated by E. and W. Muir (Penguin edition) 1961.

your own feelings) in sentences implies a considerable objectivity which can only be reached through a high level of control over yourself and your environment. It may even involve a degree of alienation from it. Far from being 'natural' (i.e. spontaneous, automatic) prose is a complex and sophisticated form of expression presupposing a formidable level of self-consciousness. If we expect our children to speak prose at a fairly early age this is because we (and therefore they) have behind us millenia of human experience which from their earliest days they continuously absorb.

1.2 (b) Prose seems to develop as men increase their control over their environment, become more conscious of their relationships towards each other and the outside world and feel the need to develop means of defining accurately what their world is like. The earliest known examples of prose tend to be laws, chronicles and early scientific treatises. When we think of early English prose we think of such a compilation as the Domesday Book. It is hard to imagine a medical tract (however elementary) in poetry: but when you recall the difficulty of saying at precisely what point 'scientific' medicine separates itself off from old wives' tales and incantations (which are 'poetic') you will recognise something of the difficulty of saying when prose began.

1.2 (c) We should beware, therefore, despite the differences, of making too sharp a distinction between prose and poetry as between two quite different uses of language. Such characteristics of poetry as rhythm and repetition also appear in prose (and much poetry uses the syntax we associate with prose). As has already been suggested, literature consists of good writing, which can be of many kinds and have many functions. There is no hard and fast distinction between prose and poetry. But that is not to say that there are no valid and fruitful discriminations to be made.

Before going any further please read the Book of *Ruth*.

2.0 THE BOOK OF *RUTH*

2.1 The version of *Ruth* that we shall be discussing is the English translation which was published in 1611 in the Authorised Version of the Bible. But it will be a good idea also to read and/or listen to the translation which is included in the New English Bible of 1970. The purpose of this is not so much to make a scholarly comparison of the two translations (for which a knowledge of Hebrew would be needed) as to help get rid of any sense of archaism or 'quaintness' which the older translation may suggest and, especially, to avoid the associations of those ghastly fruity intonations which are all too often linked with biblical 'readings' in churches. Try to avoid reading *Ruth* in a preconceived 'special' way because it is a Book of the Bible.

2.2 The Book of *Ruth* is a traditional Jewish story, set in the period of the Judges, and written down in Hebrew in the form we know it, probably in the fourth century B.C. Like most traditional stories, however, it would originally have been passed on orally and existed in some form or other long before it was written down. Exactly in what form or forms it existed previously it is, as with all 'oral literature', impossible to know for certain, but one scholar at least (Jacob Myers) thinks the language of the written Hebrew version gives evidence of an earlier poem or nursery tale which had been transmitted orally for several centuries. His conclusion is that the 'author' of *Ruth* was, rather, a literary editor producing simply an

acceptable version of already well-known material, and this seems highly probable. Indeed almost all scholars agree that at least one part of the Book as we know it was added after the rest – the last genealogical chapters linking Ruth with King David. These have nothing essentially to do with the story, though they could provide an explanation of why the Book came to be incorporated in the Bible. But whether the genealogy was the reason for incorporating the Book or was added as an excuse for preserving a popular story which hadn't otherwise much connection with the central preoccupations of the Bible, it is not possible to say.

2.3 Let us first check that you have got hold of the main points of the story. You can do this by answering the following questions:

(i) Why did Elimelech and Naomi leave Bethlehem for the country of Moab?

tick **one** only

A. Because of persecution ☐

B. Because of famine ☐

C. For the sake of adventure ☐

(ii) Why did Naomi decide to return to Bethlehem after Elimelech's death?

tick **one** only

A. Because of persecution ☐

B. Because of a good harvest ☐

C. Because she was homesick ☐

(iii) Fill in the missing words of Ruth's statement to Naomi:

'Whither thou....., I will.....; and where thou....., I will lodge; thy..... shall be my....., and thy..... my.....'

(iv) How does the story describe the relationship of Boaz to Naomi?

tick **one** only

He was A. a kinsman ☐

B. a brother ☐

C. a brother-in-law ☐

(v) How did Boaz show his good-will towards Ruth when she went gleaning? Give four indications.

A.

B.

C.

D.

(vi) Why was Naomi especially glad to learn of Boaz's interest in Ruth?

tick **one** only

A. Because she wanted to see Ruth married

B. Because he was rich

C. Because she hoped to see Ruth carry on the line of Elimelech

(vii) Why did Elimelech hesitate about marrying Ruth?

tick **one** only

A. Because she behaved immodestly ☐

B. Because there was a nearer relation with better rights ☐

C. Because she was a Moabitess ☐

(viii) Why didn't the next-of-kin want to buy Elimelech's land?

(ix) Why did the kinsman pull off his shoe?

(x) Why was the marriage of Ruth to Boaz particularly gratifying to Naomi?

2.4 ANSWERS

(i) B.

(ii) B.

(iii) goest; go; lodgest; people; people; God; God.

(iv) A.

(v) A. By allowing her to glean in his fields.

B. By allowing her to eat and drink with his people.

C. By telling the young men to let her glean and not molest her.

D. By telling the young men to drop barley specially for her.

(vi) C. (though A and B may have entered into it).

(vii) B.

(viii) At first he did, but he changed his mind when he realised this would mean marrying Ruth.

(ix) Because this was the way of sealing a bargain at that time.

(x) Because the marriage secured the continuity of the family and property of Elimelech and gave her an assured old age and a 'grandson' to look after.

2.5 The Texture and Language of *Ruth*

By 'texture' I mean the 'feel' of the story. It is partly a matter of atmosphere or tone and is achieved, like everything else in literature, by the writer's choice of words.

2.6 'Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled . . .' The very opening phrase does its work: the colloquial 'now' not meaning 'now, as opposed to some other time' but indicating a tone of voice as in 'Now, look here . . .' We use such a word, which hardly has any definable meaning at all, simply to establish a tone and in particular to 'soften' what we are saying by linking it with what has gone before. It is almost like a connecting chord in music bridging the gap between two phrases or between silence and the first phrase. Or again, the use of the word is like getting into gear. It lets the hearer in to the thoughts of the speaker, starting up the contact and helping to establish the feeling that what follows is natural and perhaps inevitable. It is the opposite of a shock opening. Without the 'now' the first sentence of *Ruth* would be more formal, more separated from what has gone before, which is not a sentence but a moment of anticipation. Something has always gone before.

2.7 'It came to pass' is formal and to us archaic, 'biblical'. Even in 1611 it was formal; it is not a phrase one finds in the dialogue of Elizabethan plays. It is the language of formal narrative. It lets us know this is a story and establishes more firmly the tone and pace of the sentence for which the 'now' has been a mere preparatory noise, a clearing of the throat. And then the next phrase establishes the 'when' of the story. This is history. It happened long ago, but at a time which the hearer will know about.

2.8 The translators of the latest version of the Old Testament (1970) leave out the 'now' and begin 'Long ago, in the time of the judges . . .'. Perhaps this is because it *is* for the twentieth-century reader longer ago than it was for the original hearers. The new translators want to take us into the past and yet to get rid of the archaic flavour of 'it came to pass' and in the course of doing so they also get rid of the intimate 'now' which brought the *hearer* into immediate contact with the story-teller. This may well be because for the translators in 1970 the Book of *Ruth* is indeed a book to be read, no longer a story to be listened to. The process of modification from an oral to a written literature has been carried a stage further and the texture has been altered.

2.9 Clearly we can't continue like this, analysing every word of the story, and I am not implying that you should conscientiously go through it, phrase by phrase, like this. But I am wanting to suggest that the tone and texture of the story, which we do need to try to define, is in fact analysable in such terms and that when we talk about literature we don't base our statements on mere hunches and imprecise impressions. We must always, at a pinch, be prepared to back up our statements by detailed analysis. If we proceed by 'impressions' – which I think we are bound to, for a work of literature is so complex that to catch its meaning whole we have to bring into play many sorts of sensitivity – we must all the time be prepared to put our impressions to the test of closer analysis, for they may easily be false impressions. I think myself that it is essential to have confidence in one's general overall impressions as one reads. If you begin reading a piece of prose too slowly and analytically, pausing on each word, you will probably fail to see the wood for the trees. What is more, you will be approaching language not as a vital thing which takes

its life from the need of the speaker to say something, but in too mechanical and formalistic a way, as though the writer were merely playing with words.

2.10 Let us get back to the question of the general texture of *Ruth*. You will find a number of general qualities which are characteristic of the telling of this story. In the first place the story, though short, is told at a leisurely pace. The teller keeps to essentials but he doesn't hurry. Many of the sentences begin with 'And' and this gives the tale a continuity; but there is nothing breathless about the 'ands' – they aren't the colloquial 'ands' of the local gossip ('And I said to her . . . and she said to me . . . and after that I told her, etc.'). The story itself is not at all melodramatic: there are moments of crisis, as when Ruth refuses to leave Naomi and when Boaz finds Ruth at his feet; but these moments arise naturally out of the action and no tricks are used to heighten the tension. On the contrary, the situation is always carefully explained before a critical encounter takes place. The writer avoids suspense. The only tension of that kind comes when we wait to learn whether Naomi's stratagem of sending Ruth to Boaz has succeeded and that tension is resolved as we read of the scene by the gate of the city in which Boaz meets the closer kinsman.

2.11 What gives *Ruth* this clear, unhurried narrative-texture, this quiet, unobtrusive, homely realism which has such power to interest and move the reader? I think that above all it is the confidence with which the social setting is projected, the way in which everything is all the time revealed against a background of activity and custom with which the reader is either familiar or can easily comprehend.

2.12 Everybody in *Ruth* acts all the time within the traditional limits of approved social conduct. Ruth is exceptionally loyal, Boaz exceptionally worthy, Naomi (until the end) exceptionally unlucky; but the exceptions do not carry them outside the bounds of an essential normality. On the contrary, the whole story is an example of what has later come to be called 'social realism'.

2.13 EXERCISE

The most famous passage in the Book of *Ruth* is that already referred to from a different angle in Unit 9, Syntax 9.0, in which Ruth expresses her determination to go to Bethlehem with Naomi:

> And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

What do you think gives these words their memorable power? Note down some points towards an answer, then compare your thoughts with mine on the next page.

A SUGGESTED ANSWER

2.14 One must first, I think, make the point that the passage, to be fully comprehensible, has to be seen in its context. This is obvious but worth saying, for otherwise one may well be making too many claims for the passage abstracted.

Much of the effect of the words, we can be sure, comes from the use of *rhythm* and *repetition*. The two are in fact combined, for it is the balanced repetition of such words as 'goest' – 'go'; 'lodgest' – 'lodge'; 'people' – 'people'; 'God' – 'God', etc. that produce the rhythmic movement of the phrases. Why should this be effective? Perhaps because it expresses a sense of identity of feeling, simply by stressing in the structure of the language that *two* people are joined in *one* experience. 'Thy people shall be my people': the voice naturally stresses the *thy* and *my* and the repetition of the word 'people' makes two people, so to speak, identical. *Thy* and *my* in English have, moreover, an interesting relationship for as words they are both different yet alike: you only have to change the first consonant (it is the same in French with 'mon' and 'ton', in German with 'mein' and 'dein', in Russian with 'moi' and 'tvoi'). This is more than chance, for it must reflect the fact that the concepts of 'mine' and 'thine' are, though in one sense opposite, in another sense inextricable. We know what 'thine' implies because we know what 'mine' implies. It is often true of language that it expresses in its structure hidden contradictions and paradoxes which are illuminated by their very expression. The *rhythms* of the phrases in Ruth's statement of loyalty in themselves express a sense of continuity, of the relationship of the two women continuing as life itself continues. 'Whither thou goest, I will go.' The rhythm which this phrase sets up and which the subsequent balanced phrases continue, ends only with the words 'and there will I be buried', which brings the sentence to a close as it brings the relationship to a close. It is the rhythm and poignancy of a shared life that has been set going by Ruth's words and that is why they are so eloquent. We judge her sincerity by the felt life within the sentences she speaks; and because we associate the phrase about death parting thee and me with the words of the marriage service they are given an extra resonance. I think we get from Ruth's words a sense of how *difficult* is the decision which she is making. The words *embody* (that word is itself worth pondering over) the emotional energy involved in the relationship between the two deprived women, their need of one another and the difficulty of adjusting to that need which is, indeed, a life-and-death matter.

2.15 What Sort of a Story is *Ruth*?

One way of getting down to a fruitful consideration of the Book of *Ruth* is to ask the question: What *sort* of a story is this? It is always a useful question to ask in literary criticism, not because one can expect a watertight answer but because it points in the right direction, the need to decide what is relevant and what isn't in relation to each particular work of literature. Some critics will answer the question in formalistic terms: this may be useful but its usefulness is likely to be limited. The more fruitful answers are likely to be a number of interrelated explorations involving both form and content (if the two can ever be separated).

2.16 What sort of a story is *Ruth*? We might begin by rejecting a number of possibilities which clearly don't apply. *Ruth* is not an *adventure* story, depending on highly-organised actions and playing on suspense. It isn't a *mystery* story, in which there is some doubt as to what actually happened. It isn't, I think you'll agree, an *allegory* (in which the people are primarily embodiments of abstract qualities like Faithful in *The Pilgrim's Progress*); nor is there any element of *satire* in it. All these words, and a good many others, can safely be ruled out.

2.17 Let's consider a number of more promising possibilities. Which of the following words seem to you to have the greatest relevance to this question 'What sort of a story is *Ruth*?'
Try putting them into three categories: A = highly relevant, B = fairly relevant, C = not really very relevant.
[N.B. It should be obvious that more than one of the words might go into the same category, for they are not mutually exclusive.]

2.18 (i) a *traditional* story

(ii) a *historical* document

(iii) a *love* story

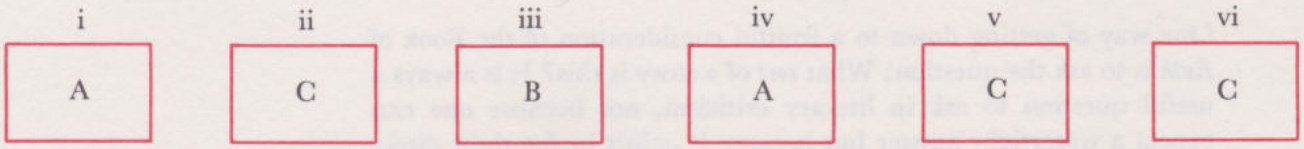
(iv) a story with a *moral*

(v) a *parable*

(vi) a *symbolic* story

(vii) Add other descriptive words of your own which seem to you relevant.

2.19 **ANSWERS**



2.20 MY OWN VIEW

If you have put numbers (ii), (v) and (vi) in category C (not really very relevant), I would agree with you. The Book of *Ruth* is interesting as an historical document, but that is merely incidental to its deeper socio-literary importance. You can argue that it is a sort of parable expressing (for instance) the virtue of loyalty; but this seems to me to be stretching the usual meaning of parable which the Shorter Oxford Dictionary gives as 'A fictitious narrative (usually of something that might naturally occur) by which moral or spiritual relations are typically set forth as the parables of the New Testament'. In other words a parable is a sort of *illustration* of a general point the speaker wants to make, and I cannot feel that this is a very central way of describing *Ruth*.

2.21 I would not myself use the word 'symbolic' about this story though I know one can use that word so loosely that almost anything is covered by it. I prefer to use the word symbol in a fairly strict sense as something which *stands for* something else. I don't think this applies to *Ruth*, though I suppose one could argue that Ruth herself 'symbolises' all loyal women and Naomi all bereaved widows. At that rate, *all* stories have a symbolic quality for every individual human situation has some relationship to a more general one. If you like to use the word 'symbolic' in such a broad sense I can't stop you; but you should realise what you are doing. If you say *Ruth* is a symbolic story, meaning simply that it has a relevance beyond that of an isolated anecdote, I would agree with what you are driving at, but would doubt whether 'symbolic' is the right word to use for I think this could apply to every successful story.

2.22 If you have put the phrase 'love story' into category B, I would, with a certain amount of hesitation, agree with you. Obviously *Ruth* isn't a love story in the sense that *Romeo and Juliet* (which would go into category A) is. But then the very concept of a love story in that sense involves a more romantic conception of love than you will find in the Old Testament or, indeed, in most societies during most of human history. *Ruth* is not primarily 'about' the feelings of Ruth and Boaz. Nor does it describe their relationship from 'within'; it simply reveals to us, objectively, what they do and say. One biblical scholar has described the Book as a love story with no direct reference to love, and one sees what he means.

2.23 Yet I would argue that it is proper to stress, at least up to a point, the 'love story' aspect of *Ruth*. For an essential part of the quality of this tale is that it reveals the intimate personal feelings of the chief characters. We *know* (i.e. in some sense we *share*) what Ruth and Naomi and Boaz feel towards each other. The story does not have the sort of impact or interest of a sociological study on the one hand or of a sermon on the other. We are moved by the story through our close apprehension (I do not mean identification) of the human relationships (I do not mean 'human condition') it conveys. And

the relationship between Ruth and Boaz is a love relationship. We shall return to this later.

2.24 I have reserved for category A the terms 'traditional story' and 'story with a moral', for I think that, along with the term 'love story', they take us near to the heart of *Ruth*.

2.25 It is necessary to stress the 'traditional' quality of this tale because this will lead us to respect the idiom or style in which it is written and the unspoken assumptions behind and within it. It is a traditional story not only in the sense of being often repeated (within the Jewish community *Ruth* is prescribed reading as part of the liturgy of Pentecost, the festival that celebrates the giving and receiving of the Law) but in the sense of being rooted in a traditional society, whose way of life goes far back into the past and whose values and customs are – to the people involved – universally known and respected.

2.26 It will no doubt have struck many of you that this story, which is included in one of the great religious books of the world, is not, in any normal use of the word, a religious story at all. The Jewish God is invoked and it is no small thing that Ruth should take him as her god, yet the significance of this is social rather than religious. No questions of doctrine or belief or even religious procedure are raised. What Ruth joins is not a church in the modern sense but a society, a tribe or nation. Her loyalty to her new community is expressed almost entirely in terms of her feelings towards her mother-in-law and of her actions which are in strict conformity to the social laws and customs of Naomi's people.

2.27 It is worth emphasising the material basis of the whole story. It is famine that drives Naomi out of her homeland and a good harvest that brings her back. The immediate problem of the two women when they come to Bethlehem is to get enough to eat. Naomi's misery and bitterness (call me Mara), her sense of coming back empty to her people, are based on the very real material problems facing a childless widow in that society. She has a bit of land but of what use is it to her? Ruth understands the position very well. She becomes the provider and has the luck to strike Boaz's land as well as to catch his eye. The precise material rewards she takes home are indicated. Naomi at once, with the peasant shrewdness which has become instinctive (though it is well based in social custom), grasps the possibilities of the situation and plays her cards well. The situation is highly promising, for it was the custom of the Jews, as of other agricultural peoples at that stage of development, that a widow should marry – or at least be given a child by – the deceased husband's brother or next-of-kin and so incorporated into the family unit. The custom (known as levirate marriage) probably went back to earlier days of group-marriage and has a very obvious basis in terms of social and individual need. In such societies there is no possibility of continuing life save in terms of family co-operation and land-ownership. Ruth realises this very well. She knows her social role. That is why her wooing of Boaz, quite without coquettishness or coyness, is so right – for everyone concerned. And it is why, at the end of the story, when the neighbours speak of the child as 'a son born to Naomi' they are not talking merely in terms of metaphor. It may well have been she who is thought of as legally Boaz's wife, for the levirate marriage is a family rather than an individual affair.

2.28 If we think of Ruth as a modern English girl we shall not understand her at all. How far she is from the modern romantic conception of a heroine becomes obvious when one compares the image of Ruth conjured up by a nineteenth-century poet with the Ruth of the Old

Testament. Victor Hugo, it is true, in his poem 'Boaz endormi' grasped the traditional nature of the situation. But Keats, in the 'Ode to a Nightingale', seems to produce a different sort of girl in the lines

> Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
> Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn.

The lines are extremely beautiful and, in their context, moving; but they have little to do with the Ruth of the Bible, about whose homesickness there is no evidence at all.

2.29 If we apply our contemporary social values to Ruth she is bound to seem very servile or very calculating or both. But once we recognise her for what she is – more like a girl from parts of Africa or the Middle East of today – we immediately accept her as both realistic and sensitive, hard-headed and good. She is no more the Western romantic heroine than Naomi is the contemporary old-age-pensioner or Boaz the Edwardian sugar-daddy. In Coronation Street their conduct would seem sordid or ridiculous, if it could be explained at all; for in Coronation Street social roles are quite different and most of the younger people do not wish for a role at all, whereas in Bethlehem Judah everyone has his role and virtue lies in fulfilling it well, with tact and decorum, as Ruth does.

2.30 The decorum is the decorum of a simple, rural society in which nothing is far from the crude struggle for existence. When the story tells how Naomi, Ruth and Orpah 'lifted up their voice and wept' we have to take it literally: this is the traditional wailing or 'keening' of bereaved peasants which, to the modern urban ear, sounds very strange and even 'insincere' but is rooted in the common life of a simple village community in which griefs are shared and ritualised. Ruth's behaviour, when she goes to the threshing floor where Boaz sleeps, has also the flavour of a ritual. If one wanted a single word to describe the subject-matter of the Book of *Ruth* one might well decide upon fertility. The fertility of the soil and of the women is the chief preoccupation of the teller of the story. If all is well on these counts, prosperity and happiness will be likely to follow. It is Naomi's fate to move from fertility to barrenness – 'I went out full and the Lord hath brought me home again empty' – and then, when she has nothing to hope for, to be returned by Ruth to a state of honourable matriarchy, contentedly nursing the child which, because Boaz is Elimelech's kinsman, is treated as hers. Ruth is a true folk-heroine, an ancestress of Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles, operating in a less alien society. Perhaps it is significant that Pentecost, when the Book was read, was itself a harvest festival.

2.31 *Ruth*, it should be said finally, was a traditional story even to the 'author' who wrote it down and feels obliged to 'date' it and to explain about the custom of the plucking off of the shoe to seal a bargain, which dated from an earlier phase of Jewish history.

2.32 To stress, then, the *traditional* nature of this story is to say something about its style as well as its subject-matter. The basic method of the narrative is to give an account, with very few frills, of what the characters do and say. The *feelings* of the characters are revealed through their actions and this is possible because the teller of the tale assumes that his readers or hearers understand the social significance of what is happening. The listener will know precisely what to make of Ruth's action in uncovering the feet of Boaz: he will know (since he is familiar with the social customs of this society) that it doesn't mean that Ruth is a loose woman, and he will know

too that Boaz's response shows he is an honourable man. When an author can rely on his audience sharing the traditional responses of their society he can be very 'objective' in his narrative methods.

2.33 The basic technique of *Ruth* is essentially like that of many later novels, Jane Austen's for instance. It is a story about human conduct within a relatively small and stable social unit. Public and private lives are scarcely separated and the quality of individual feeling is revealed through actions which any other sensitive member of the same society can evaluate. The very language of *Ruth* is the language of custom and convention, its rhythms those of an ingrained respect for traditional social proprieties.

2.34 *Ruth* as 'a Story with a Moral'

This raises the whole question of what we mean when we talk about the 'moral' of a story. We may imply a rather crude moralistic or didactic view of literature in which the main point is to come up with a more or less appropriate moral precept; or we may mean simply that the story contains some moral implications.

2.35 I take it that very few people will wish to argue that the Book of *Ruth* is primarily a didactic work in the first sense. It does not have a crude 'moral' tacked on to it (e.g. 'And the moral of this story is that if you are nice to your mother-in-law you will find a rich second husband'). It is not a crude moral exemplum of that kind. If you have said in your answer that it is a good story because it has a good moral, I think you are likely to be oversimplifying rather dangerously.

2.36 On the other hand, it is obvious that the story *does* have various moral implications and that these probably had a good deal to do with its survival. Scholars have made a variety of suggestions as to what – at the time – Jewish people felt to be the point of the story of *Ruth*. Some have seen it as a kind of liberal counterblast to the exclusivist preachers who were warning the Jews against marriage with non-Jews and who taught that Jehovah's bounty was reserved exclusively for his chosen people. Others stress its emphasis on the virtues of family solidarity and the custom of levirate marriage. Others, again, see the chief social function of the Book as the production, in the last chapters, of a respectable genealogy for King David. All these functions it no doubt has, though none of them would be successfully fulfilled but for the artistic achievement of the author, his capacity to arouse the imagination and feelings of his readers.

2.37 I do not doubt, myself, that what has made *Ruth* 'last', what has endeared it as a story to so many generations of readers, is its literary or aesthetic quality. It is 'a good story'. But to say this is only to state the obvious. The more difficult task is to try and decide what, in this case, literary quality means. It is not simply a question of what I have called 'texture', though that enters into it. Values and value-judgements are also involved and that is why I think it important to use the word 'moral' in our evaluation of *Ruth*.

2.38 We are moved by Ruth's situation for rather complex reasons, but they certainly include our sense of her being a good person whose decisions and choices are well-based. We know nothing of her relations with her dead husband, Naomi's son, but her decision to throw in her lot with her mother-in-law, *expressed in the terms it is*, assure us of the quality of feeling within the family unit. Once in Bethlehem she shows (again through the actual terms in which the story is told) a combination of practical sense and delicate feeling

which is best expressed perhaps by our sense that she is behaving well. I think it is dangerous to put the 'moral' of *Ruth* in any more dogmatic way than this. It is a story celebrating the virtues of loyalty, independence and modesty in women: yes, but not in the abstract. We are given a sense of how, in this sort of situation, one ought to behave – *not* by the pointing of a moral but by our being made sufficiently aware of the situation and its ramifications to enable us to *appreciate* – both in the sense of understanding and of *judging* – Ruth's conduct. Like good art in general, the Book of *Ruth* renders us sensitively aware of something that is happening, and that sensitiveness is at the same time sensuous and moral in the way it operates. It is only in so far as the story 'comes alive' to us that a 'moral' may come across to us. If we feel at the end, for instance, that it is no bad thing to marry a foreigner, that is simply and solely because we have been made sensitively aware of a situation in which a marriage between a Jew and a Moabitish woman has clearly been justified. The author of *Ruth* may have had a propagandist intention of this sort: if so, he has been successful not because his propaganda point is true in the abstract, but because he has made his readers undergo an experience from which they are likely to draw certain conclusions. Most of us are suspicious of the word propaganda because we associate it with being got at. But when the propaganda is successful we don't have a sense of being got at but rather of being enriched. And at this point we generally stop using the word propaganda.

2.39 It is perhaps worth remembering that all art is propaganda in the sense that we are liable to draw conclusions from works of art that may affect our outlook and our future actions and this may quite legitimately be one of the intentions of the artist. But, as the Mad Hatter might have said to Alice, to say that all art is propaganda is not the same as saying that all propaganda is art.

2.40 It *is* worth while to emphasise that *Ruth* is a story with a moral because unless we recognise the moral dimension of this sort of art we leave out something very important.

A sentence from one of Henry James's Prefaces is worth thinking about:

> There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it.

2.41 At one point (para. 2.12) in discussing *Ruth* I used the term 'social realism'. I used it deliberately, to underline the down-to-earth quality of this biblical story, so firmly set in a specific social situation. But I do not propose, in this Foundation Course, to enter into a general discussion about 'realism', one of the most confusing terms in literary criticism and one which most of us find we can neither avoid nor define quite happily.

2.42 We cannot easily, however (as I have suggested), altogether avoid the word, partly because it will propose itself so insistently when we begin to compare *Ruth* with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and partly because it is relevant to an important literary aspect of *Ruth* itself, leaving aside comparisons. Try asking yourself for a moment the question: 'What is it that makes *Ruth* so *convincing* as a story?' You can jot down some possible answers on the next page, though I intend to take up only one aspect of the matter.

2.43 I feel sure you will have included among your suggestions some reference to the 'realism' or convincingness of the details. You may not have used the word 'realistic' but you will have had in mind such points as:

(a) The detail that Orpah starts off for Bethlehem with Naomi and Ruth and later changes her mind. This somehow adds to the convincingness of the situation in a way which would not have been achieved if Orpah either had decided not to come in the first place or had come all the way. It is *psychologically* realistic that the two daughters-in-law, both obviously attached to Naomi, should respond in a somewhat different manner.

(b) Such details in the gleaning episode as: Boaz telling the young men not to interfere with Ruth; the details as to what they ate and drank; how Boaz tells the young men to drop a few handfuls purposely; the recording of how much Ruth has gleaned; Naomi's good advice afterwards about keeping with the maidens. We are told very little about the young men except that they are there, in the background; but their presence in the scene is important for they, young, vigorous, lusty, represent a possibility, perhaps even a danger, for Ruth, which she rejects in favour of the more mature and far-reaching claims of Boaz.

(c) The precise details of the scene in the night, culminating in the phrase 'and she rose up before one could know another' (3.14) with its vivid evocation of the crack of dawn.

(d) The bargaining scene between Boaz and the kinsman at the gate.

(e) The colloquial turn of speech on numerous occasions.

(f) The final glimpse of Naomi with the child at her bosom.

All these details convince us by their intimate authenticity; the author is adept at producing the shaft of light which illuminates the actual way people in a familiar social situation behave and talk. Time after time he brings the scene to life by the sort of realistic detail which assures us that these are actual, particular people and not cardboard figures being trotted out to illustrate a precept. I do not think we can or should avoid the word realism to describe this technique, recognising that the skill lies in the choice of authentic detail which bolsters our confidence that this is something that could actually happen and probably did. But it is also worth noticing that the sense of social actuality is conveyed by a number of well-chosen details rather than by an exhaustive description of the whole scene.

KAFKA (1883–1924)

3.0 The story you have been asked to read alongside the Book of *Ruth* is Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, written in 1912, published (in German) in 1915 and translated by Willa and Edwin Muir into English. The first publication of the Muirs' translation was in 1933, nine years after the author's death.

3.1 We have chosen Kafka's story not only because it is a remarkable thing in itself and not simply because it makes a very clear contrast with *Ruth*, but because, in a way not altogether easy to define, it seems to express some of the most striking characteristics of much twentieth-century writing. It may seem strange to refer to so unique and eccentric a writer as Kafka as 'typical', yet many sensitive and serious readers have seen him in this way. W. H. Auden, for example, could write:

> Had one to name the author who comes nearest to bearing the same kind of relation to our age as Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe bore to theirs, Kafka is the first one would think of.

This is a judgement that not everyone would agree with. (I myself would treat it with reserve.) But Auden is by no means alone in making this sort of claim. As we discuss Kafka we shall perhaps see why.

3.2 Before we begin to consider *The Metamorphosis*[1] I shall say something about Kafka as a man and writer. Whether you read this section before you have read the story or afterwards doesn't much matter and is perhaps an unreal issue for this is a story you will need to read several times. Albert Camus, the French novelist, once said: 'The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread'. We will come back to Camus' point but it is worth bearing in mind from the first. On the whole I would prefer you to have read the story *before* you read the section that now follows; but some people, I know, prefer to start with some information about the writer. The reason for reading the story first is simply that it is good to get a direct impact, uninfluenced by what other people have said. Even if you modify your first reactions later, it is good to have had as spontaneous a reaction as possible. I don't want to make heavy weather of this point, however, for our reactions are probably never quite as spontaneous as we think they are, and in any case this is, as I've said, a story that needs several readings.

Kafka's Life and Times

3.3 Franz Kafka (1883–1924) was born and lived most of his life in Prague, which became the capital of Czechoslovakia in 1919. For most of his life the Czech lands (Bohemia and Moravia), however, were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ruled from Vienna by the Hapsburg emperors with the aid of an extremely bureaucratic administration and with German as the 'official' language of the state. Kafka's family normally spoke German, he went to a German-speaking school and university, and wrote in German. Despite the German culture amid which he grew up, he did not however feel

1 Look the word up in a dictionary if you're not sure what it means.

himself to be German or Austrian, but a Czech Jew, though his family did not practise the Jewish religion and he was not himself, in any orthodox sense of the term, religious. He was not a political person but his political sympathies were socialist. In August 1914, at the outbreak of war, he wrote:

> Patriotic parade. Speech by the mayor. Disappears, then re-appears, and a shout in German: 'Long live our beloved monarch, hurrah!' I stand there with my malignant look. These parades are one of the most disgusting accompaniments of the war. Originated by Jewish business-men who are German one day, Czech the next; admit this to themselves, it is true, but were never permitted to shout it out as loudly as they do now.

3.4 The complexities of Kafka's social situation have been paradoxically but effectively expressed by Günther Anders:

> He was by destiny and nature an alien, and it is for this reason that the technique of alienation plays such an important part in his work. For where indeed did he belong? As a Jew not quite to the Christian world; and as a non-practising Jew – as he originally was – not quite among the Jews. As a German-speaking Czech, not quite among the Czechs; and as a German-speaking Jew, not quite among the Bohemian Germans. As a Bohemian, not quite to Austria. As an official of a workers' insurance company, not quite to the middle class. Yet as the son of a middle-class family, not quite to the working class. He cannot feel at home among his office colleagues, for he knows himself to be a writer. But he is unable to live entirely as a writer either, for he sacrifices his energies to the welfare of his family. 'But in my family I am more estranged than a stranger. . . .'

As becomes apparent in Anders' description of him, Kafka's family was well-to-do middle-class, his father a successful self-made businessman. The relation between Kafka and his father, however, was always uneasy and became one of the central problems of his life. The father was dominating, unimaginative, ambitious for his son. Kafka resented his father yet felt neurotically guilty about his attitude. He could bring himself neither to accept his domination nor to break free of it. It seems to have been the same with his relations with women. He desired marriage but feared it even more. He hated his own loneliness yet clung to it desperately as a central factor of his integrity as a writer. Despite a number of friends who loved and admired him, his life seems to have been in most respects desperately lonely and unsatisfying. He was nearly always ill or at least tired. Even his writing, to which he devoted everything, tormented him. He finished few of the stories he began and published even fewer. 'I finish nothing because I have no time and it presses so within me,' he wrote in his diary. When he died of tuberculosis at the age of forty he left instructions that almost his entire work was to be destroyed. His friend Max Brod ignored the instruction and gradually, after his death, all that he had left, including the two remarkable unfinished novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, was published.

3.5 Even if we did not know these facts, I think we should sense much of this story from Kafka's writings, which have a compulsive character about them and at the same time a kind of intense, obsessive integrity and even objectivity which makes it impossible to dismiss them as the work of a neurotic. Neurotic Kafka undoubtedly was, but neither self-indulgent nor self-pitying. Although he has little to

exhibit but the intensity of his own isolated experience he is the least exhibitionist of writers.

3.6 As a student Kafka studied law, a subject he particularly disliked. Later he worked as a clerk with the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague, working in a department which studied methods of preventing accidents in industry. He was conscientious in his work and became something of an expert on the subject. But his office work and a nagging sense that he ought to be doing something more responsible for his family undermined his health and equanimity and prevented his giving the time he needed to his writing. But it was his writing that took his emotional energy and his writing that was the core and meaning of his life, even though without Max Brod's constant encouragement he might never have become a writer, and though he was constantly dissatisfied with what he wrote.

3.7 Brod himself wrote of how in 1909 Kafka for the first time read him a chapter of a novel he was writing:

> I got the impression immediately that he was no ordinary talent speaking but a genius. My efforts to bring Kafka's work before the public began from that moment. . . .

Kafka wrote in his diary in 1913 (about the time of the composition of *The Metamorphosis*):

> The tremendous world I have in my head. But how to free myself and free it without being torn to pieces? And a thousand times better be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me.

Though beset by every conceivable doubt and unable to take the most trivial fact for granted, he seems to have been possessed by a sense that his compulsion to write was a sort of fate. But he was quite without the uncritical romantic self-confidence of many nineteenth-century writers:

> Anxiety alternating with self-assurance at the office. Otherwise more confident. Great antipathy to *Metamorphosis*. Unreadable ending. Imperfect almost to its very marrow. It would have turned out much better if I had not been interrupted at the time by the business trip. (Diary, 19 January 1914.)

Again, later in the same year, he wrote:

> What will be my fate as a writer is very simple. My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background; my life has dwindled dreadfully, nor will it cease to dwindle. Nothing else will ever satisfy me. But the strength I can muster for that portrayal is not to be counted upon: perhaps it has already vanished forever, perhaps it will come back to me again, although the circumstances of my life don't favour its return. Thus, I waver, continually fly to the summit of the mountain, but then fall back in a moment. Others waver too, but in lower regions, with greater strength; if they are in danger of falling, they are caught up by the kinsman who walks beside them for that very purpose. But I waver on the heights; it is not death, alas, but the eternal torments of dying. (Diary, 6 August 1914.)

4.0 Kafka is an extremely elusive writer and is often thought of, not without reason, as a difficult one. It is true that it would be *extremely* difficult to say the last word about Kafka or to make a full analysis of the art and meaning of *The Metamorphosis*. But this (which is equally true of, say, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) shouldn't put one off reading Kafka, who is a compelling and interesting writer even on a single, fairly casual reading. 'Difficult' writers can also be the most enjoyable, even though one knows quite well that one hasn't got to the bottom of them. It is the same with one's friends. One doesn't *expect* to be able to sum up an interesting person or an intriguing story in a few glib sentences.

4.1 I don't propose, in this 'Introduction to Literature', to get involved in a complex analysis of *The Metamorphosis*. Let us concentrate on a few questions which should lead us some way towards defining the quality of this strange and powerful tale.

I How does Kafka manage to make us take the first sentence of his story seriously?

II What sort of a person is Gregor?

III What actually happens to the Samsa family as a result of Gregor's transformation?

IV What do you make of the last few pages of the story?

V In discussing the 'meaning' of *The Metamorphosis* what are some of the considerations to bear in mind?

VI What are some of the chief points of contrast between the Book of *Ruth* and *The Metamorphosis*?

I The Opening

4.2 Let us concentrate for a bit on the opening of the story, the first few paragraphs, which will be sure, in any story, to be important because they set the tone. In this case, this is, I think you'll agree, a considerable understatement; for *The Metamorphosis* has a first sentence upon which everything depends and is in fact one of the most striking openings in all literature.

4.3 It is wrong, of course, to draw too many conclusions from a single sentence, even a very striking one. Most people, I imagine, will have reacted to that first sentence with a mixture of surprise and horror. The idea is unexpected and even outrageous. Some readers will have found the image that has been evoked so distasteful that they will have felt inclined to reject it altogether, as we often reject unsavoury or particularly disturbing pieces of information, preferring not to think about them. Some may well have suspected a trick, or perhaps a joke. The author can't *really* mean what he says: there must be a catch in it. But as we read on, such paths of escape are all closed to us. This is not a dream, nor a delusion. It becomes clear that Kafka *does* mean what he says. Gregor Samsa really has turned into an enormous insect.

4·4 How does Kafka manage to make us take this extraordinary first sentence seriously? If someone had come up to you this morning and told you that his brother had turned into an insect you certainly wouldn't have believed him. You would assume, at best, that he was pulling your leg, or at worst, that he had gone mad. And, again, you might well feel that the joke wasn't in very good taste. Yet as we read further into Kafka's story it becomes clear that such a phrase as 'not in good taste' is quite irrelevant. Kafka isn't trying to shock us by being 'daring' or 'unconventional' in any sensational or superficial way. Gregor isn't a relation of Dracula. Nor is he, pretty clearly, pulling our leg, for the total effect of the first pages of *The Metamorphosis* is entirely serious. How does he manage this? How is it that we find ourselves taking this unusual happening seriously?

4·5 Try to satisfy yourself about this problem before turning to my suggestions. Write down your ideas on how the author makes us take the metamorphosis seriously.

DISCUSSION

4.6 (N.B. I want particularly to emphasise that in this and subsequent 'answers' or discussions you must not assume that I am necessarily right. All I can claim as an 'authority' on a story like this is that I am a fairly experienced reader who has thought a good deal about problems of literature and probably has easier access to many books and libraries than most of you. But that doesn't make me infallible. Imaginative insights into works of literature are not to be guaranteed by university degrees or teaching experience, though we must hope that these can sometimes help! But do not discard your own personal responses or opinions in favour of mine unless you are really convinced by what I say.)

4.7 I think Kafka makes us take Gregor's predicament seriously by two principal means: (i) by his extremely plausible account of Gregor's own reactions to what has happened to him (so that we feel that *if* someone did turn into an insect this is probably how he would feel), and (ii) by the entirely convincing realistic account of Gregor's environment: his room, the flat, the family, etc., including, of course, the very important point that everyone in the story, not just Gregor himself, vouches for the reality of the transformation.[1] And one must add to these two points the equally important one that the way he achieves this convincing realism is by an extremely matter-of-fact concrete style which avoids exaggeration, anything high-flown or pretentious.

4.8 One feature of this matter-of-fact style is the very careful, precise use of adjectives and adverbs, which tend to understate rather than over-emphasise. When Kafka uses words like 'gigantic' and 'pitifully' in the first paragraph he uses them accurately for their precise descriptive value, not for some vaguely emotional effect. In the description (in the second paragraph) of the picture Gregor has cut out of a magazine no emotive or critical adjectives are used though it is clear that the picture is a rather vulgar sort of contemporary pin-up portrait and that Gregor's affection for it tells us something about the paucity of his emotional life. Gregor's feelings as he looks round the room are merely 'quite melancholy' (it is true he isn't yet convinced that he *has* changed).

4.9 This unemphatic quiet style has the double effect of: (a) enhancing, by contrast, the actual horror of the situation which it would in fact be difficult to exaggerate (when we use the term 'difficult to exaggerate' we are in practice recognising the inadequacy of exaggeration as an effective method of describing extreme feelings and situations); (b) allowing the reader a good deal of freedom to think about the actual implications of what is being described. The writer who supplies a run of emotive adjectives is forcing the reader to respond to the situation in *his* way. Kafka, who generally goes in for rather flat, colourless adjectives, allows the reader to assess the scene for himself, thus increasing our sense of an objective unforced description.

4.10 Notice the way Kafka wins our confidence through the casual, apparently 'unnecessary' (but in fact most important) detail. The sliding off of the quilt gives a vivid sense of poor Gregor's appalling

1 In contrast, for instance, to the Ghost in *Hamlet* whom not everyone sees, or apparently, *can* see.

practical problems precisely because it is a detail at once so homely and so *active*. Again, in the last sentence of the third paragraph, the description of Gregor's attempts to turn over (itself vivid enough) is marvellously enhanced by the phrase 'shutting his eyes to keep from seeing his struggling legs'. The human habit of screwing up one's face when making a great effort is here linked with the equally human tendency to shut one's eyes to avoid unpleasant realities.

4.11 But most striking, perhaps, is the *psychological* realism to which some of the details already mentioned contribute. Gregor's first – and, for a time, continuing – reaction to his transformation is simply not to believe it. Or, rather, to believe it and not believe it at the same time. He knows very well, from the first sentence of the story, what has happened, for he can see and feel himself. And yet to 'know' such a thing involves more than this first immediate perception through the senses: such knowledge involves, in itself, some sort of adjustment. And this is Gregor's problem. ' "What has happened to me?" he thought' and, though he *knows* it is not a dream (a point Kafka has to insist on to the reader, as well as to Gregor), he *cannot believe* that what has happened isn't an illusion, a 'nonsense' that he will soon be able to forget about. The interesting thing here, surely, is that the processes of thought and feeling which Kafka is evoking are common to actual human experience. Neither you nor I have ever turned into an insect, yet we *have* experienced in a less extreme form the sort of problems of adjustment that Gregor's experience evokes. If you have ever broken an arm or had an operation you know how easy it is momentarily to 'forget' your situation. We actually recognise the validity of such a description and in recognising it our own sensitivity to the way human beings (including ourselves) actually behave and think is enhanced: even though we *know* (what precisely does 'knowing' mean?) perfectly well that people do not turn into insects.

4.12 What, as you will have realised, I am leading to here is the strange paradox, so deep in Kafka's whole method as an artist, that *The Metamorphosis*, though obviously 'unrealistic' in every common-sense use of the word, is at the same time in some way or other extremely 'realistic', in the sense that we recognise that it is about life and human experience as we know it.

4.13 Note that I am not suggesting that *The Metamorphosis* is *more* real than life, for that is impossible, or that Kafka has discovered some reality deeper or truer than reality, for that is impossible too. What I am suggesting is that he has discovered a new way of describing reality.

4.14 It is instructive to compare the opening of *The Metamorphosis* with a passage Kafka wrote some years earlier in a novel entitled *Wedding Preparations in the Country* which he did not finish. The chief character of this story, a young man named Raban, is a typical Kafka figure, full of obsessive doubts and fears. He finds difficulty in facing the prospect of going into the country with his fiancée and, in the course of a description of his fluctuating emotions, the following passage occurs:

4.15 > And, besides, can't I do what I always used to as a child in matters that were dangerous? I don't even need to go to the country myself, it isn't necessary. I'll send my clothed body. If it staggers out of the door of my room, the staggering will not indicate fear, but its nothingness. Nor is it a sign of excitement that it stumbles on the stairs, if it travels into the country, sobbing as it goes, and there

eats its supper in tears. For I myself am meanwhile lying in my bed, smoothly covered over with the yellow-brown blanket, exposed to the breeze that is wafted through that seldom-aired room. The carriages and people in the street move and walk hesitantly on shining ground, for I am still dreaming. Coachmen and pedestrians are shy and every step they want to advance they ask as a favour from me, by looking at me. I encourage them and they encounter no obstacle.

As I lie in bed I assume the shape of a big beetle, a stag-beetle or a cock-chafer, I think.

4.16 The passage has an obvious interest in that it shows that the idea behind *The Metamorphosis* had been in Kafka's mind for some time; but the deeper interest for the student of literature is to compare the use of the same concept in the two cases. In the earlier story Raban's metamorphosis is simply an *idea* in his head. Kafka describes his thoughts in a kind of neurasthenic soliloquy. This is the way the distraught young man's mind is moving and his wandering thoughts finally lead him to compare himself, quite consciously, with an insect and indeed to assume *in his mind* the shape of a beetle. There is no question of his *really* becoming a beetle.

4.17 By the time he came to write *The Metamorphosis* Kafka had developed his technique as a story-teller in a highly original direction. Whereas Raban imagines himself assuming the shape of an insect, Gregor Samsa actually becomes one. Metaphor is carried a stage further. It is almost as though Kafka is saying: a metaphor may not merely throw a certain light on reality by comparing it with something else; it may express a reality in a way that nothing else can. And, if this is so, which side of the comparison is metaphor, which side reality?

4.18 I have approached this as a literary or aesthetic question rather than a philosophical one, but you may feel, as I think Kafka did, that it is not possible to separate the two.

II What Sort of a Person is Gregor?

5.0 It is important to ask this question because the story is so obviously, until the last few pages, *about* Gregor and therefore anything we may finally wish to say about its meaning or significance must depend to a large extent on our assessment of Gregor. All that we can know about Gregor is, of course, what Kafka tells us and I suggest you should, at this point, re-read the story, noting carefully what you learn about Gregor, both directly (through 'hard' information) and indirectly (through what he does). For instance we learn directly in the second paragraph that he is a commercial traveller: we learn indirectly as we read on that he is full of fears and worries about his job and his ability to hold it. These fears are first reflected on page 10[1] in the passage which includes the sentence 'If I didn't have to hold my hand because of my parents I'd have given notice long ago, I'd have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him.' We immediately recognise here the voice of the rather weak person who keeps up his courage by persuading himself that in slightly different circumstances he would be quick to assert himself. We know very well that telling the chief exactly what he thought of him is precisely what Gregor will never do.

5.1 Jot down, then, on the basis of the evidence from the story, your assessment of the sort of person Gregor is. Then turn to my discussion of this question.

1 This and all references are to the Penguin edition.

5.2 Without attempting anything like a complete account of Gregor's characteristics, these are some of the important ones.

His life seems to be dominated by two things: his work as a commercial traveller and his relations with his family. Nothing else enters into his life, though there is mention at one point (p. 47 bottom) of 'two or three friends in other firms, a chambermaid in one of the rural hotels, a sweet and fleeting memory, a cashier in a milliner's shop, whom he had wooed earnestly but too slowly'. Nothing else except a photo of him on military service. He seems, indeed, to have had no life but his job. When at home he does nothing but prepare for his work, read the newspaper and a bit of fretwork. Even with his family he seldom goes out. He lives by the routine set by the alarm clock.

5.3 Neither aspect of his life could be called at all satisfying, though he seems to have enjoyed at times a certain pride in managing to support his family ('he felt great pride in the fact that he had been able to provide such a life for his parents and sister in such a fine flat', p. 27). But 'they had simply got used to it, both the family and Gregor: the money was gratefully accepted and gladly given, but there was no special uprush of warm feeling' (p. 32). In fact, apart from his ambition to give his sister the chance of musical training, there is almost no warm or generous emotion in Gregor's life, and as one reads on the impression is more and more of a life dominated by fear. Fear of the tyrannical and pernickety firm for which he works (and to whom he is tied by his parents' debts), and at the same time fear of losing the job he dislikes. His life appears on the surface to be calm and respectable; but it is full of fears. His fear of his employers is graphically illustrated by his moment of 'irrational hope' (p. 15) that the door will not be opened when the chief clerk rings. It emerges in the panic-stricken outburst (quite unintelligible to his listeners) to the chief clerk (pp. 21–22) which reveals very clearly his lack of self-confidence. 'Travelling is a hard life', he says, 'but I couldn't live without it.' He hates his life but fears to lose it.

5.4 His relations with his family are not much more satisfactory, for they too are dominated by his worries about money. After his metamorphosis this is the emotion he still feels most strongly. 'At first, whenever the need for earning money was mentioned, Gregor let go his hold on the door and threw himself down on the cool leather sofa beside it, he felt so hot with shame and grief' (p. 34). His concern for his family has brought little warmth or happiness into his life and the fact that he locks all the doors of his room at night seems to indicate his lonely isolation. His relations with his father are not frank and straightforward but seem dominated by his need to propitiate the old man. There seems never to have been, after the father's retirement, a frank discussion of the financial situation, for it turns out that the father has more resources than Gregor had been told: but Gregor feels no sort of indignation about this. He is afraid of his father and doesn't expect him to treat him as an equal. Only towards his sister does he seem to feel any positive emotion: in general his devotion to his family is based on a self-effacing failure to assert himself in any but trivial and obstinate ways. And his passive acceptance of the metamorphosis, which he thinks of largely in terms of inconvenience and embarrassment – almost as a

sort of punishment – even suggests that he has in some sense willed the change, or at least that there is a frightful appropriateness about it.

5.5 I think it is important to make this sort of objective assessment of the quality of Gregor's existence, even though the story is obviously not a realistic character-study: otherwise one is in no position to discuss any 'symbolic' or 'allegorical' significance the story may have. I can feel little confidence, for instance, in any interpretation which can describe Gregor as 'a young man doing well in business', as one critic does. You cannot get at the 'deeper' meaning of a work of art unless you first get its more obvious surface meaning right.

III The Family

6.0 We have concentrated so far on Gregor himself but it is important to stress that Kafka's story isn't simply a study of the chief character, seen in isolation. Quite the contrary, *The Metamorphosis* is just as much about the Samsa family as a whole as about Gregor and it ends, not with Gregor's death, but with a longish passage about the rest of the family: it is suggested that a change has come about in *their* lives too. In other words, *The Metamorphosis* is not about a person merely, but about a situation and the situation consists, as human situations always do, in a number of relationships which – Kafka is very insistent – are inter-dependent.

6.1 Let us take a look at the story, for a moment, from the other characters' point of view. How do the members of Gregor's family react to his transformation? Jot down below some of the chief answers to this question and then decide which of them are the most important.

DISCUSSION

7.0 You will probably have begun by saying that his family are shocked and horrified by Gregor's metamorphosis. But you will also have realised that this is an insufficient answer: there is more to it than that, and shock anyway is an *immediate* response, not a long-term one.

7.1 The different members of the household react, of course, somewhat differently. Those that can get away from the situation and, so to speak, wash their hands of it, do so. But Mr. and Mrs. Samsa and their daughter can't do this and they also manage to find one other figure – the charwoman – prepared to help them cope.

7.2 The mother's reaction is the most straightforward. The situation is simply too much for her. She shows affection for Gregor but is overcome by the horror of it all, can do nothing practical except do sewing to help the family's finances. The father is more complex. He shows throughout little or no sympathy for Gregor's predicament. It is he who, on each of the three occasions of Gregor's 'escape' from his room, takes the initiative in driving him back. It is he who throws the apples and he who frankly expresses his thanks to God when Gregor is dead.

7.3 The father's role in the story is, indeed, particularly interesting. He deeply resents the disturbance to his life that Gregor has caused yet at the same time rather enjoys re-asserting his power in the family. One gets the impression that he is quite grateful to Gregor for giving him the opportunity to vent his rather absurd dignity and his capacity for self-righteous indignation. Like many parents he seems to have a contradictory attitude to his son, feeling resentful if Gregor is not independent and responsible, yet not really liking it when he is. He has, it seems, not been entirely honest with his son about his financial situation and has indeed exploited Gregor's rather passive good nature pretty unscrupulously. Like his wife and daughter he is relieved when Gregor dies, not simply because the monster has been removed from the family circle but because they will now be able to move into a smaller and more convenient flat of their own choosing.

7.4 The sister Grete has the warmest, most human relationship with Gregor and she alone tries, at least for a time, to cope in a humane way with the new situation. Understandably she finds this difficult, for Gregor's new form is exceedingly repulsive: but Kafka also stresses the more dubious aspects of her concern for Gregor. Her considerateness has more than a touch of egotism, for she is both possessive and jealous in her attitude to her self-appointed tasks, though this doesn't prevent her from neglecting them.

7.5 As time goes on, in fact, his sister's attitude becomes even less sympathetic than the rest of the family's and it is she who ends by saying frankly that the insect is no longer Gregor and must be got rid of. The irony here is, of course, that it is precisely Gregor's generous feelings about his sister (though are even they, perhaps, a bit suspect?), emerging in his emotion at the sound of the music, that leads to the events which bring on the final catastrophe.

7.6 Two things strike me strongly about the Samsa family: how concerned they are about appearances and how little need they have, from what one gathers of their life, for such concern. Their life is really so empty that the constant obsession with money has very little point to it. They get remarkably little fun out of life and clearly never have. They seldom go out. They seem to have few intellectual

interests and little taste as far as cultural matters go. One of the amusing details is the absurd and recognisable way in which the father 'takes over' the daughter's violin-playing. (' "Could not Fräulein Samsa come and play in this room, beside us, where it is much more convenient and comfortable?" "Oh certainly," said Gregor's father, as if he were the violin-player', p. 52.) This scene, incidentally, which is moving in its total effect though funny in its details, is of crucial importance in the story. I think it very likely that the role of music in *The Metamorphosis* is to suggest the whole possibility of art as a liberating force in the social situation Kafka depicts.

7.7 The Samsa family seems to have in general the characteristics of a modern, town-dwelling, petty-bourgeois family. Their flat (with its connecting rooms and double doors and rather high ceilings) is a typical continental middle-class home of the (now) old-fashioned type. As in all countries with large peasant populations, cheap servants are available for the urban middle class. The Samsas are at the same time insecure and conservative, vulgar and snobbish, pretentious yet with nothing to be proud of. Socially they live in a sort of limbo between the rich whom they envy and fear and the poor whom they despise. They do not know how to behave to people either 'above' or 'below' them socially, so that one moment they are kowtowing to their lodgers and the next moment expelling them. Their reaction to the charwoman's practical solution to their awkward problem of getting rid of their dead son is to sack her (and in some respects her treatment of Gregor has compared favourably with theirs). The insecurity, which is the key feature of the Samsa's existence, is all the time linked by Kafka with their social situation. Once they have had pretentions to a respectable prosperity; then the father has lost his money and got into debt and they have lapsed into a shame-faced dependence on Gregor's activities as a commercial traveller. After the metamorphosis they are quickly 'reduced' socially to a working-class existence. ('They fulfilled to the uttermost all that the world demands of poor people, the father fetched breakfast for two small clerks in the bank, the mother devoted her energy to making underwear for strangers, the sister trotted to and fro behind the counter at the behest of customers, but more than that they had not the strength to do', p. 47.) Then, with Gregor's death, they suddenly seem to look at their fate in a new way, with renewed hope, accepting, as it were, their own metamorphosis from a genteel but parasitic to a more down-to-earth existence. But we will return a little later to the question of the end of the story.

7.8 Meanwhile, in relation to Kafka's presentation of the Samsa family, one should note a feature which it is not easy to put one's finger on precisely – the comic aspect of this macabre tale.

7.9 When *The Metamorphosis* was dramatised fairly recently people seem to have been surprised to discover that the play, besides being shocking, was very funny. Yet this is something Kafka himself always emphasised in his work. In even the grimmest moments of the story we are, in fact, invited to laugh. The scene towards the end of the first chapter, in which Gregor first appears to the family in his new form and the chief clerk makes his undignified exit, is comic because it exposes, with a sort of absurd remorselessness, the falsity of so much conventional behaviour. It is understandable, heaven knows, that his family does not know how to cope with

Gregor's metamorphosis: it is comic, in a grim way, that they should so expose the poverty of their resources, their false dignity, their inadequate conventions. I think part of the secret of Kafka's comic power is that, by using such an extreme and (on the 'realistic' level) incredible device as the turning of man into an insect, he releases us, his readers, from our normal prejudices as to what is and what is not serious.

7.10 Some of Kafka's comic effects are not – when you come to think of it – so very different from traditional forms of comedy (compare Gregor's transformation with Bottom's metamorphosis into an ass in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) or later 'absurd' comedy. Some of the plays of Ionesco, for instance, use similar devices. The basis of much traditional 'realistic' humour is in incongruity, often expressed by the pushing of a normal situation to an unlikely extreme. We laugh at Titania embracing Bottom partly, I think, because we are glad to see this refined and haughty lady in a thoroughly undignified situation which, despite its fantastic absurdity, does really tell us something about Titania, especially about her sex life. The incongruity which Shakespeare, by non-realistic fantasy, contrives, does in fact expose other incongruities which are more obviously 'real'.

7.11 Is it not, perhaps, the same with *The Metamorphosis*? Is Mr. Samsa's reaction to his son's transformation really much more absurd than his behaviour to his lodgers? Is the old charwoman who seems to see the old dung-beetle as an odd kind of family pet less humane in her responses than the sensitive Grete? Given the nature of the crisis in the Samsa household, is it any more absurd to see the situation as at least partially comic than to feel sorry for Gregor?

IV The End of the Story

8.0 Please re-read the final pages of *The Metamorphosis* from the moment of Gregor's death.

8.1 You will have noticed that these pages differ from the rest of the tale in that the story is no longer told from Gregor's point of view. Kafka, who has throughout made us see the situation through Gregor's consciousness (though not, of course, using the first person) and might have ended it with Gregor's death, now becomes, so to speak, an impersonal, god-like narrator looking at the situation from the outside. One can well imagine how much unease such a role must have cost him, for his basic method as a writer is to write about his own experiences and he seems to have felt that any other stance would be excessively arrogant. As Professor Goldstücker points out in his radio programme, all Kafka's main characters are obviously very nearly himself, as even their names testify. 'Samsa' as a name is structurally similar to 'Kafka'.

8.2 Bearing this in mind, what are we to make of the end of the story? What effect is Kafka wishing to convey? Try your hand at this problem before going on to the discussion.

8.3 In general terms there can be little doubt that the reason Kafka did not end his story with Gregor's death must be that he wished to present not the study of an individual, but a *situation* which involved the family as well as Gregor. If *The Metamorphosis* is about the quality of life of a group of people then it is reasonable that at the end the focus should be shifted from Gregor to his family.

8.4 Nor do I think there is room for much doubt as to what *happens* at the end of the story. The Samsas – father, mother and daughter – are relieved that their ordeal is at an end and look hopefully towards the future. The final sentence in which the daughter gets to her feet and stretches her body is in complete contrast to the first sentence in which Gregor lies in a bed from which he will never emerge as a human being.

8.5 The problem lies in our *interpretation* of these last paragraphs. What conclusions, if any, are we intended to draw? There seem to me to be at least three possibilities.

(i) That the Samsas have learned nothing from their experience. Having mercifully got rid of Gregor, they return with relief to their life of complacent illusion ('new dreams and excellent intentions').

(ii) That they have come to realise that Gregor has always been a burden to them and they are better off without him. A sort of cancer has been removed. (Gregor has even selected the wrong sort of apartment for them.)

(iii) That Gregor's metamorphosis has, for whatever reasons, had the effect of making his family more realistic about their situation, more self-reliant and in tune with nature.

There are, no doubt, other possible emphases. And your choice among them will depend, I think, on your overall impression of the story's nature and meaning.

V The 'Meaning' of *The Metamorphosis*

9.0 I have stressed so far the more or less 'realistic' aspects of *The Metamorphosis* and have been discussing the story almost as though one could treat it as a straightforward realistic narrative. And I think it is important to Kafka's purposes that we should, on one level at least, do precisely this. Indeed, by his style of narration he insists that this should be done.

9.1 But of course one can't go on indefinitely pretending that this *is* a straightforward realistic story. We have to ask, sooner or later, more searching questions which are much more difficult to answer. What does *The Metamorphosis* mean? What is the status of that remarkable first sentence which sets the whole thing going and itself alters everything that comes after it?

9.2 Although these questions are so central I do not propose to press them here. It is for *you* to answer them and if you do not answer them yourself Kafka's method has failed. All I can do is to raise a number of points for your consideration which I hope may help you to get the story's impact and assess it. Some of the points, you will notice, overlap and are not incompatible with one another. Others imply contradictory emphases.

(i) ON KAFKA'S METHOD:

(a) Most people's first reaction to this story is that it is very extraordinary and very horrifying. And yet everything that happens in it *except one thing* is ordinary enough.

(b) 'What shocks is not the monstrousness of his world, but the fact that the monstrousness is made to appear natural.' – Adorno.

(c) In many rituals, ceremonies and even plays people wear masks. Sometimes these make them totally unrecognisable. What is the purpose behind this metamorphosis?

(d) 'He has found, after the manner of his kind,
Mere images.' – W. B. Yeats (1919).
Many writers of Kafka's day regarded the essence of art as the production of significant images or symbols. Is this relevant to *The Metamorphosis*?

(e) 'Kafka's method consists in suspending the prejudices normally associated with certain labels by redistributing these labels, so that impartial judgement becomes possible.' – Günther Anders.

(f) 'The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to re-read. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be re-read from another point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings. This is what the author wanted.' – Albert Camus.

(g) When a piece of literature can be interpreted in more than one way this may indicate the failure of the author to make his meaning clear. But it may also indicate that the sort of meaning the author is trying to express does not permit of a simple unambiguous expression.

(ii) SOME RELEVANT QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

(a) Are you the same person you were twenty years ago? If not, how do you account for the metamorphosis?

(b) Have you ever had, or can you imagine, the experience of doing something (it doesn't matter what) that makes you feel *disgusting*, *inhuman* in some way, somehow different from and isolated from the people around you?

(c) When I trim my garden hedge and throw the branches on to a bonfire so that they turn to ashes, that is real. When I dream that I am trimming my garden hedge and the branches I cut off turn into green snakes, that is not real. But which sentence tells you more about me?

(iii) SOME QUESTIONS OF MEANING:

(a) 'Being an animal presumably meant to him (Kafka) only to have given up human form and human wisdom from a kind of shame.' – Walter Benjamin.

(b) 'At one time he (Kafka) thought of collecting all his writings under the title *The Attempt to Escape from Father*.' – Hugh Sykes Davies.

(c) Kafka once said to his friend Gustav Janouch, 'Is it perhaps delicate and discreet to talk about the bed-bugs in one's own family?'

(d) Consider the transformation that takes place in a healthy and active man when he is stricken by some incurable disease. Consider also the transformation in the life of the household.

(e) 'Has he (Gregor) become less, or more than human?' – F. D. Luke.

(f) 'In Kafka the descriptive detail is of an extraordinary immediacy and authenticity. But Kafka's artistic ingenuity is really directed towards substituting his *Angst*-ridden[1] vision of the world for objective reality.' – George Lukàcs.

(g) Consider the view that *The Metamorphosis* is about man depersonalised by society.

(h) 'Kafka did not wish to present man as alienated either from himself or from society. He wished to say, and he said, that in man himself, not in any power outside him, is his indestructible life, and that in order to set that life free men must be aware of its wonder and know and trust themselves.' – Alick West.

(i) *The Metamorphosis* was written by a Czech of Jewish family living in Prague in the time of the Austrian Empire and writing in German. How significant are these facts?

VI *Ruth* and *Metamorphosis*

10.0 The two stories are so obviously different that you may feel that there is no point in comparing or even contrasting them. But I should like, in closing this Unit, to make two general points for you to be thinking about.

10.1 (i) If we state the contrast between *Ruth* and *The Metamorphosis* as one between a 'realist' and a 'non-realist' story we should be careful to examine just what we mean by this. Is *The Metamorphosis* really less concerned with reality than *Ruth*? Even if we use the word 'realistic' to refer to the form or technique of the stories rather than their content or relation to life, we have to tread very carefully, for in some respects Kafka's tale relies more on 'realistic' detail and observation than does *Ruth*. So I would draw the moral that you should not imagine you have said very much if you have contrasted the stories simply in terms of 'realism'.

(ii) The more fruitful contrast, in my opinion, needs an historical slant to it. The Book of *Ruth*, as we saw, is a story bound up with the traditional assumptions of a changing, yet stable, society. The author is constantly assuming that the reader shares, or is at least deeply familiar with, the knowledge, the culture and the values of a particular society. The beauty of the story rests, to a high degree, on a sense of *security*. We can be confident that the perceptions of Ruth are valid perceptions, that her values are good values. There is an implicit assumption throughout the story that a person's character can be revealed and tested by his social actions, that tact and decorum are virtues, that loyalty is better than disloyalty, that family relationships and obligations are *ipso facto* to be respected, that traditional sanctions should not lightly be brushed aside. In reading *Ruth* you know where you are.

But with *The Metamorphosis* nothing is certain. What is real and what is imaginary is no longer an obvious distinction. We can assume nothing. A dream may be more revealing than an

1 Angst (German) = anxiety, in the sense of a neurotic obsession.

action. Such concepts as character or even personality are basically queried. There is no agreed code of social and moral values to which we can confidently refer and against which we can assess the doings of the characters. How should or do parents and children behave to one another? At what point does the conventional become the disgusting? In the world of *Ruth* you can be pretty certain that if someone feels guilty he (and you) will know why: but in *The Metamorphosis* what is guilt? Kafka's prose is cagey, sceptical, ironical, furtive: the prose of our version of *Ruth* is secure and serene. It encompasses depths while Kafka's probes them. *Ruth* as a work of art is the product of a society which knows its past and is confident of its future: *The Metamorphosis* of a society in which past and future are alike uncertain and every relationship has to be redefined.

10.2 Note that I am not suggesting that Kafka has no values or standards or that he thinks there is no difference between illusion and reality. I am not suggesting for a moment that Kafka's story does not involve the author in moral discriminations. Kafka is in his way as much a moralist as the author of *Ruth*: but it is an entirely different way. He can be *sure* of nothing. He has nothing to cling on to save his own agonised determination to free himself of the 'tremendous world I have in my head'. Nothing? No; that is an exaggeration. Kafka does not deny the existence of a reality: rather, he finds it immensely difficult to discover what reality is and what is his relation to it, if the two are separate. The insights embodied in a story like *The Metamorphosis*, difficult as they are to define, are insights into *our* world, not a private one. I have tried, in this Unit, to avoid expressing at all dogmatically my own views about *The Metamorphosis* for I want you to develop your own responses to the story. But one thing I am quite certain of: that anyone who reads this story and thinks that Kafka is trying in some way to degrade man to the level of an insect should read and ponder over the tale again and again. Nor, emphatically, should the comment on the cover of my Penguin edition of the story – 'a haunting parable on human reaction to suffering and disease' – be taken as the last word on the subject.

10.3 The comparison I am making between *Ruth* and *The Metamorphosis* is a social matter in the very deepest and most complex sense, for it involves not only people's relationships with one another in society: fathers and children, men and women, masters and servants, judges and judged; but their relationship as social beings with the entire reality outside, including the physical world. In an extraordinarily suggestive thought, Walter Benjamin has made a comparison between the imaginative world of Kafka and a passage from Eddington's *Nature of the Physical World* published five years after Kafka's death. (Eddington was, of course, one of the most famous physicists of his day.)

> I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business. In the first place I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank travelling at twenty miles a second round the sun – a fraction of a second too early or too late, the plank would be miles away. I must do this whilst hanging from a round planet head outward into space, and with a wind of aether blowing at no one knows how many miles a second through every interstice of my body. The

> plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through? No, if I make the venture one of the flies hits me and gives a boost up again; I fall again and am knocked upwards by another fly; and so on. I may hope that the net result will be that I remain about steady; but if unfortunately I should slip through the floor or be boosted too violently up to the ceiling, the occurrence would be, not a violation of the laws of Nature, but a rare coincidence. . . .

10.4 This is not the place to pursue the implications of Benjamin's comparison, which would of course involve, among other things, an assessment of Eddington's own assumptions. But I think it is worth while (especially for those of you who have found this unit of any special interest) to close with the thought that just as it is not possible to say much about *Ruth* without bringing into play our knowledge of Jewish history and the customs of early societies, so is it impossible to explore the implications of *The Metamorphosis* without some sort of reference, however general, to such phenomena as Freud's psychology,[1] Marx's analysis of the class-structure of society, the religious philosophy of Kierkegaard and the developments in modern theoretical Physics. I do not mean that you cannot read Kafka without first reading Marx or Kierkegaard. I do mean that it is very important not to keep one's awareness of these very different fields of human activity in water-tight compartments. An Introduction to Literature will appropriately end by insisting that literature, though in one sense a special activity, is always and necessarily part of human development as a whole.

1 e.g. Hugh Sykes Davies' radio talk on *Psychoanalysis and Literature*.

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Notes

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